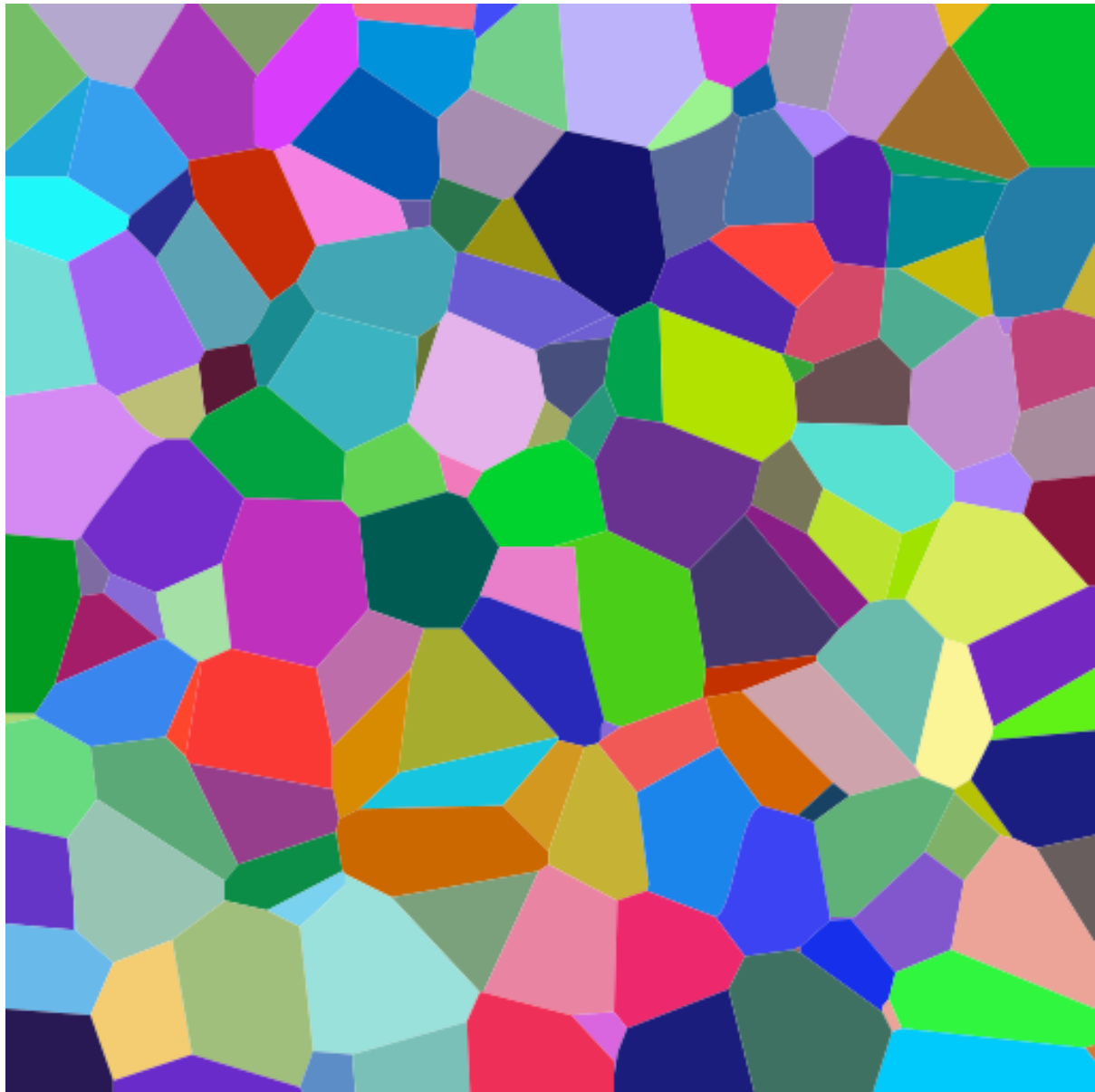


# **Tessellating Dissensus: Resistance, Autonomy and Radical Democracy**

Can transnational municipalism constitute a counterpower to liberate society  
from neoliberal capitalist hegemony?



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*“See the world through the eyes of society’s weakest members, and then tell anyone honestly that our societies are good, civilised, advanced, free.”*

Zygmunt Bauman

*“The word without action is empty; action without the word is blind; and action and the word outside the spirit of the community is death.”*

Indigenous Proverb, South Western Colombia

*“The authentic unit of political life is the municipality.”*

Murray Bookchin

## **ABSTRACT**

In this thesis I explore the idea and the newly invigorated movement of municipalism as a social, political and economic unit of organisation emerging in response to the ecological, social and psychological failures of the present neoliberal capitalist economy and the democratic crisis of the centralised state. I focus on the intersection of theory and practice where contemporary social movements are taking resistance into existing political institutions to prefigure a new radically democratic society. Learning from experiences in Frome, Barcelona and around the world I contend that the municipality is the organisational scale best able to bring about a new economic logic for the transition to a sane, sustainable, free and compelling twenty-first century life through truly democratic and authentically political processes.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The journey didn't begin with this piece of work, or here at Schumacher College, so the full list of people to thank for nudging my life toward this point is too long to include. To my parents, for providing me the privilege of a safe and stable environment from which to question all around me; my grandparents for their endless support in facilitating this transformative year; my free education at The Open University for engaging the fascination and motivation that had lain dormant within me; the diverse bunch of teachers, students, growers, volunteers and visitors with whom I have shared this home for the past twelve months; and to Ellis, for the support, friendship and love without which I wouldn't have been able to rise to this challenge: thank you.

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*“We cannot ask writers to tell us the truth, because each writer is telling their own singular truth, their personal indignation transformed into universal indignation, their joy that enlightens the world in a singular way. Of importance is the breadth of vision that an author opens to us, how large is the window they provide.”*

Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis forms the culmination of almost a decade of academic study, and with such an investment of time and attention it is necessarily a deeply personal piece of work. It reflects not only my fulfillment of an academic requirement but my passionate, soulful sharing of the social and political unlearning and reassembling that has been so central to the last third of my life. It emanates from a childhood feeling of unease with *the way things are*, of the simplistic questioning of long working hours over enjoyment and family life, of consumption and status over experience and contentment; then of political competition over considered, compassionate, rational understanding; and latterly of frustration with the fundamental disconnect between science, ecology, sociology, politics and economics, and the sense of acceleration, confusion and nihilism pervading the 21st century. The Economics for Transition MA at Schumacher College was the place where all of these disquiets, frustrations, questions and feelings found themselves collectively aired and received a coherent understanding and a diverse, positive, holistic response - no part of me was ‘checked at the door’ to conform to expectation. It is a place that understands the academic and the existential, the head, heart and soul, the hope and the despair - it is a place that is encouraging of an academic enquiry being bound up with deep metaphysical healing. Vitally, through the understanding that nothing exists alone, that everything is connected, it offered the transdisciplinarity that I was seeking.

The focus of this project then reflects my sense of the principles of a political, social and economic trajectory toward addressing the sources from which these problems can be traced, and of overcoming the social separation between each other, the alienation within ourselves, and the artificial segregation of humanity from the ecology within which we survive. In doing so it also addresses the growing

authoritarianism, reactionary populism, and perpetual (yet un-generalised) crisis that similarly fuels much of the breakdown we are witnessing in the present.

But, in keeping with the preceding quote, Schumacher College is also a place that runs on an (unofficial) motto of '*this is not the truth*'. Gregory Bateson identifies the "*lack of knowledge of the presuppositions [...] of everyday life*" (Bateson, 2002 [1979], p.23) as a missing 'tool of thought' common among people of all backgrounds: it is not a lack of knowledge, education or an insufficiency of cognitive ability which hinder the resolution of planetary ills, but a surety in the foundations of being, materially and metaphysically, that is neither objectively merited nor structurally suitable for building upon. I contend from this that, in general, solutions are more likely to come from questioning what we already 'know' and the systems we already use than from adding more 'knowledge' or fetishising the new. As a child I sensed some of the arbitrary, contingent, mutable nature of things and this has only grown stronger with time. Thus the 'child's mind', and humility, openness and a willingness to have conceptual frameworks and consciousness exposed, explored, challenged, and reconstituted are the most important attributes of a student tackling the 'common sense' and structural logic of this destructive paradigm. In this vein then, this thesis is not about resurrecting or repurposing grand ideologies from past contexts, arguing within and across 'isms', or claiming the superiority of this perspective or programme over that. To be sure much of what follows could fit within, or more likely across, the theoretical and ethical frameworks of anarchist-communism<sup>1</sup> or libertarian-socialism<sup>2</sup>, but it is with an understanding of the power of engagement and enfranchisement, co-creation and cooperation, humility and sharing - and of not creating unnecessary, immediate divisions - that these labels are not pushed forward, but instead the deepening of democracy and the primacy of community take centre stage. This lesson is one learnt, and taught, by the Zapatistas in Mexico, by the revolutionaries in Rojava, and by the growing social movements in Europe, a triad of differently-scaled and diversely-enacted revolutions

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<sup>1</sup> Anarchist communism "advocates the abolition of the State and capitalism in favour of a horizontal network of voluntary associations through which everyone will be free to satisfy his or her needs", including "opposition to all forms of political power, hierarchy and domination" and the abolition of wage labour. (Roux, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> "Libertarian socialism is a group of anti-authoritarian political philosophies inside the socialist movement that rejects socialism as centralized state ownership and control of the economy, as well as the state itself." (Wikipedia, 2017)

in different contexts all aiming toward the goals of genuine democracy, social justice, ecological sustainability, and a life of meaning.

I have attempted to evoke this plurality and openness to difference through the title and imagery on my cover page. For me 'tessellating dissensus' is about combining or *fitting together* the different sites of contestation of the present hegemonic structures - the different perspectives on what constitutes *the good life* or utopia and the diverse directions, methods and tools for resisting and for creating a better future, without all of them being required to subscribe to the same politics, ideologies or worldviews. What is made universal is the discontent, dissent and the desire for better: the direction and not the dogma. In the image, a *Voronoi tessellation*, the differently coloured polygons represent this diversity of communities, municipalities, social movements, political platforms, activists, ontologies - the heterogeneity of society and human consciousness globally as against the homogeneity of global capitalism - while the complete gapless image represents the potential scale and power of these varied components when articulated together systemically: their unity in diversity. Distinctly, this evokes a 'spreading out' rather than a 'scaling up' to achieve this counterpower, an important shift in perspective from hierarchical to horizontal forms of organisation.

## **AIMS**

The aim of this research is to understand the potential of municipalism - a form of decentralised socio-political organisation intended to bring power and freedom to ordinary citizens - to enable widespread, holistic, systemic transformation of politics, economics, social life, ecological harmony and culture through its core aspects of deep democratisation and community empowerment; to understand the potential 'potency' for the social majority of decentralised and diverse place-based organisation against its impotence under the centralisation, hierarchy and power of the status quo; and to articulate and prefigure a post-capitalist world beyond protest and negation that is plausible, compelling and humanly-scaled.

I have envisioned this as a trinity of *resistance*: the challenge of holding off the most damaging of neoliberal policies such as austerity, privatisation and the hollowing-out

of democracy, and the defence of political and social possibility outside of the capitalist, centralised state; *autonomy*: the ability to create small-scale political, economic and social alternatives to the status quo, either within or against the existing structures; and *radical democracy*: the creation of direct citizen participation, the deepening of civic life, and the process of institutional structural renewal toward genuine ‘people’s rule’ (Lummis, 1996).

These processes are bound up in the reemerging concept of the municipality as the humanly-scaled geographical, organisational and social level of government best placed to be responsive to the idiosyncrasies of diverse communities and yet capable of working in concert to address large-scale, universal issues such as climate change. The concept of *counterpower* - used here in the form employed by Murray Bookchin to mean the creation of a ‘dual political structure’ (Bookchin, 1992) that can gradually, through its actions, efficacy and appeal - and confrontation - divert legitimacy and power away from the dominant structures - provides the route through which these processes redistribute power away from the centralised state and capitalist economy to the democratised municipality and ultimately to citizens themselves. The concept of dual power exemplifies municipalist logic - radical, combative and revolutionary, yet peaceful, democratic and deeply ethically legitimate.

## METHODOLOGY

Because my focus with this thesis is to gather and evoke a sense of the development and spread of the transnational municipal movement as a whole and of its theoretical potential for the radical democratisation of existing political institutions, my research is largely desk-based. I see the usefulness in marrying-up and uniting where possible the existing and often unknown theory with the existing and equally often unknown practice, thus much of my work has been in articulating and threading particular instances of political resistance, small scale political radicalism and political analysis into the idea of municipalism.

This process was exemplified by the Fearless Cities International Municipalist Summit in Barcelona which I attended halfway through my research. The summit



brought together intellectuals, activists, politicians and practitioners from diverse global contexts to share experience, strategy and solidarity in this movement. Through its workshops, roundtables and social spaces I was able to gain a large amount of specific information as well as to orientate myself as to where theory and practice are mirrored, misaligned or missing.

In order to acquire a slightly deeper understanding of a particular instance and aspect of the 'infiltration' of ordinary citizens into the political process I visited the Somerset town of Frome, UK, to interview Peter Macfadyen, former mayor and author of the independent politics guidebook 'Flatpack Democracy'. Peter was able to give me insight into this particular 'peaceful revolution' as well as information on the spread of similar initiatives in town councils across the UK. From this I was able to understand how much of his practice and his aims originated from a 'common sense' analysis of the political situation outside of any deep knowledge of or attachment to the theory, a key theme to emerge in this research.

## **Background: Why This Topic?**

I think it is instructive to talk briefly about the evolution of my thinking in arriving at this research topic and the other ideological avenues that I have pursued during the past year, as it sheds light on my sense of some of the problems with other approaches which help inform this work.

Confronting the many and diverse issues facing humanity in the 21st century provoked for me an interest in anarchism as a political ideology able to address them holistically, from 'upstream', and at a small scale allowing the presence of human plurality and freedom. As a 'readymade', though massively diverse and pluralistic, ideology, anarchism encompassed my nihilistic tendencies toward social and political institutions, my ethical commitments to equality and social justice, and my sense of the necessity of a radical, confrontational approach to stem the degrading nature and practice of contemporary society and to rebuild a new, humane, ecological, liberated one. Pursuing this interest and educating myself more in the history and modern practice of anarchism did not disprove for me its *rightness* and its liberatory potential, but I reached the realisation that its distance from social

and political reality, its tendency - through the many interpretations of its adherents, and as a result of its long history - toward faction and dispute, and its thorough (and deliberate) degradation as a term in the eyes of the majority of the public prevented it from being a political choice for today to bring into being sustainable political change. Enfranchising the 'ordinary man and woman on the street' using language that they associate with violence and destruction would not be possible, and the rehabilitation of the term and its ideas - while a process gaining increasing attention at an academic level (e.g. Anarchist Research Group at Loughborough University; Contemporary Anarchist Studies from Manchester University Press), and valuably so in my opinion - is a longterm ideological project unlikely to filter into the mainstream soon enough for our needs.

In light of this I chose to focus my attention on *autonomy*, which in my mind is the process of disconnection from oppressive or unjust structures of society - from the necessity of wage labour for survival, from the commodification of human relations, from the infringement of the neoliberal state into personal freedoms - and can be discussed in terms less alienating and politically divisive than anarchism. The opportunity to appeal to the libertarian-inclined of both left and right persuasions, to the conservative hostile to state interference and the social liberal desiring economic freedom, and the ability to frame resistance and undertake confrontation at a local level around specific issues whilst freely articulating a better future appeared as a way to coalesce diverse forms of dissatisfaction and discontent into unified political action. This unity of typically oppositional political perspectives was epitomised for me at the ZAD (the 'zone to defend') at Notre-Dame-des-Landes in Brittany, where anarchists, environmentalists, families, farmers and peasants came together under police brutality to resist the construction of a second airport (TeleSUR, 2017). By opposing the damaging social and ecological impacts of a hierarchical imposition, a decision made far away by people uninvolved and for the benefit of private capital, this resistance spoke to people across the political spectrum, across ages and lifestyles, and by being grounded in a place a community arose that was autonomous, self-reliant, self-organising, cooperative and diverse. Following this example, my research was to be an exploration of other similar locations and communities, from issue-specific resistance, experiments in communal living, squats, communes and growing projects grounded in economic critiques of marketised housing and food production (such as Marinaleda in Spain), libertarian

self-reliance and attempts at utopian realisation (such as Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen, Land Matters in the UK, etc.), with the desire to understand how these 'sites of dissensus' could somehow articulate their critiques collectively to present a systemic, rather than dissipated, opposition and proposition demonstrating alternative ways of living, organising and *being*<sup>3</sup>. In attempting to shape a research question around this topic and reading previous dissertations that also tackled this issue (Sbeih, 2014), it became clear that this too was not the solution that I was seeking. The focus on autonomy, when viewed as a *retreat* from existing socio-economic and political structures into a defended space, is itself not a systemic approach, as well as being one that risks removing its most active participants from engagement with and opposition to the reality of the current system. Though I am fully supportive of this approach in the places and situations in which it is happening, when pursued as a strategy this way forward risks leaving behind at best a continuation of the status quo (in a similar way to which refusing to vote allows the extant powers to remain or embolden), or at worse creates a vacuum in which the excesses and injustices of the system worsen for those unable to find or establish their own self-reliance or mutual aid (which, let's face it, is the majority of people).

It became apparent from this that any resistance, any alternative being articulated, any engagement in creating a better political, economic, and social world should *intersect* with the powers and processes as they exist today, and that they not only address the situation systemically for all of society, but effect change as a part of the process of engagement. This perspective was reaffirmed by two other realisations: first, that community is a far more accessible resource and powerful site of transformation if it can be cultivated in-situ, i.e. if existing estates, blocks, streets, villages, and towns can be brought into dialogue and activity as they are, rather than activists and engaged individuals stepping *out* and *back* from their communities to establish like-minded communities *elsewhere*; and secondly, that the diverse social movements confronting issues such as institutional racism, sexism, homophobia, ecological degradation and climate change, social isolation and mental illness, economic injustice and political apathy, and so on were at a point of high effort and visibility but compartmentalised successes and limited horizons, so there was a need for them not only to work together intersectionally *across* these specific issues,

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<sup>3</sup> This project had also already been undertaken by others: see the incredibly powerful documentaries 'Paths Through Utopias' made by John Jordan, and 'We The Uncivilised' by Pete and Lily Sequoia.

but altogether *beyond only* protest, boycott and attention-raising to a point of direct political, radical democratic engagement.

By locating these issues at a root cause, whether it be in a critique of hierarchy, capitalism, of the large-scale, globalisation or of the democratic deficit at the heart of the centralised state, and thinking of how to tackle this rather than to merely ameliorate the symptoms in separate, siloed ways, the value of a *prefigurative politics* emerged. By attempting to engage with the political system and effect change from within, addressing these issues where they are united - at the sites of political decision-making, as well as the sites of economic power which perpetuate these injustices - *at the same time* as preventing the worst excesses from growing and affecting the most vulnerable, it is possible to move beyond resistance and autonomy and into creation and action, changing the daily lives of the effected and of the community as a whole.

This united for me with my earliest ‘moment of clarity’ at Schumacher College which came with the discovery of Joanna Macy’s ‘Three Dimensions of The Great Turning’, in which the concepts of *holding actions*, *new systems*, and a *shift in consciousness*<sup>4</sup> are all operating in concert with one another, rather than in tension, to achieve change (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). The language and process of the ‘New Municipalism’ unites the effort of protest, the desire of disengagement, of creation, and of inner transformation into a coherent yet ideologically undogmatic quest for radical, systemic, holistic change. For me this is a thoroughly integral radicalism that can stem the tide of capitalist degradation - of soil, of soul, and of society (Kumar, 2013) - whilst democratically envisioning and building a resilient, truly sustainable, thriving future for all.

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<sup>4</sup> This final dimension could also be likened to an expansion of the ‘Overton Window’, the shifting range of palatability of policies with the public - the horizon of the status quo - dictating what exists, what is popular, what is radical and what is unthinkable; or through the understanding of Jared Diamond’s concept of creeping normality (aka ‘the frog in the pot’), whereby change that occurs gradually, incrementally retains the perception of normality even when the outcome is far removed from the initial state.

## Source: Four Factors of Global Crisis

Reading and hearing about the plethora of multifaceted crises that face humanity is a part of the daily routine of many a concerned citizen, but keeping abreast of the latest news and witnessing the global scale of environmental, social, economic, political and cultural degradation fills one with a cocktail of confusion, fear, and impotence. The news media is both a business and a politically-shaded window on the world and so its reporting, direction and misdirection of attention, and cultivation of negativity and passivity is not a benign outcome of reality but a tool of governance, whether deliberately concocted or merely as an outcome of the agglomeration of separate, agenda-driven and paradigm-conformed decisions (Curtis, 2016). Many activists, journalists and academics recount such issues in order to inform and motivate those concerned to act, but as I have read and watched and learnt and become more able to recount the list of global catastrophes it seems as though I have become inversely less and less able to act or to locate a place to direct my attention. Repeated exposure leaves me numb, overwhelmed and disempowered. The problems seem intractable, protest and petitioning are merely reactive and powerless - I want to retreat into disconnection, hedonism or nihilism. In light of this experience I do not want to include the inevitable list to foreground this essay. I have instead included - in brief - some pertinent aspects of the *systemic crisis*, rather than *outcomes* or *symptoms*; some facets of the logic driving the system, some 'big picture' issues, in an attempt to reveal the structural limitations of the amelioration of problems *downstream*<sup>5</sup> without an understanding of their source.

***Economics as Politics:*** Economics is the tail wagging the political dog. Out of a social democratic post-war development phase in which a degree of balance was struck, or at least tension maintained, between the market, business and the wealthy on one hand and the general interest of society and of the most vulnerable on the other; and in which politicians 'did politics' within this double movement to broadly countervail excesses and create stability, emerged a new phase - marked by Thatcher-Reagan leaderships - in which politics became subducted into and under

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<sup>5</sup> A reference to the phenomenology of Henri Bortoft (cited often at Schumacher), in which we must travel upstream in order to understand the point at which we are at and the true nature of what happens downstream (Bortoft, 2012); and to Donald Ardell's allegory in which villagers rescue drowning victims from a river, without the time or criticality to question why or how these people are entering the river in the first place (Ardell, 2017).

economics, and the role of the State became the rule of business (Earle, Moran & Ward-Perkins, 2017). In this neoliberal context the needs of society have become abstracted and intermediated by the needs of the economy under the belief that the growth of the latter will bring about the former. Political power has become a paradox: it is at once absent and omnipotent, diffuse yet concentrated, vested in big business, finance, lobbyists, wealthy individuals and supranational organisations and divested from agents of government. Power is ungraspable even by those attaining the most powerful positions, as Barack Obama's presidency revealed. The imperatives of global finance, including the legacy of economic, political and social homogenisation that stemmed from the structural adjustment plans of the IMF and World Bank, have led to the loss of national policy autonomy as politicians seek merely to manage the economy. The task of relocating economics *within* politics and, more vitally, within *ecology*, is key, yet breaking the relation of money and power is a seemingly insurmountable task.

***Growth and Consumption are Required, Ecological Unsustainability and Crisis are Built-in:*** Capitalism requires growth<sup>6</sup>, growth requires consumption, consumption requires resources<sup>7</sup>. Maturity and sufficiency are not attributes of the current financial system; equilibria and dynamic balance are organic features wholly subverted by capitalist logic. A consumer society predicated on accumulation for success, an economy built on GDP for success, and a global system built on economic hegemony all reduce the metrics of life to financial drivers, and when economic activity is divorced from the natural world on which it depends - wherein finite nature is transformed into instrumental and exchangeable 'natural capital', and environmental destruction becomes economic 'externality' - a systemic environmental crisis is the outcome. Ameliorating environmental damage through global treaties whilst pursuing economic growth and global capitalist expansion can only ever be a superficial render on a structurally unstable edifice. Similarly, economic crises do not indicate a failure of the system, they are instead a necessary component of its functioning, the *"irrational rationalisers of an always unstable*

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<sup>6</sup> "A healthy capitalism has to grow at 3 percent per year; the problem is to find where you can achieve that 3 percent growth." David Harvey (2009).

<sup>7</sup> 'Decoupling' of economic growth from resource use is often cited as a way out of this unsustainable paradox, but its realisation - through either technological development or cultural shift - is not likely any time before ecological or social pressures reach their tipping points (nef, 2010).

*capitalism*” (Harvey, 2010, p.71). On the short-term macro-economic scale ideological economic dogmatism is fueling cyclical suffering and dysfunction. As the Bank of International Settlements, the central banks’ central bank, states plainly, “*consumption-led growth is less sustainable*” than investment-led growth, and - once again - “*the leading indicators of financial distress provide a general sense of a build-up of risk*” (BIS, 2017), yet the largest economies of Europe and the United States are choking public spending and increasing public debt<sup>8</sup> (whilst rhetorically aiming for the opposite outcome) for the benefit of private companies (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2012), and benefitting from national growth figures created by personal and household debt (TUC, 2017; Lombardi & Mohanty et al, 2017). On the large, historical scale of the *longue duree* of global capitalism it is the internal contradictions of accumulation<sup>9</sup> which fuel capitalism’s ‘dynamism’, expanding markets, indebting countries, collapsing economies and finding new terrain, preventing a steady-state of wellbeing from ever persisting. In short, economic crisis will not bring about the fall of capitalism - it will always reemerge. Breaking the conflation of economic growth with ‘strong, healthy’ countries and rebuilding the link between material production, resource consumption and the natural world are both minimum requirements for reducing the scale of the planetary crisis that is looming ever closer, while socio-cultural - and *political* - opposition to capitalism, and the envisioning of a world beyond it, are vital to mobilise sustainable alternatives.

***Modernity and Mental Health:*** Suicide is the biggest killer of men under 50 in the UK (ONS, 2014) and the second leading cause of death in 15-29 year-olds globally, while depression is the leading cause of disability and ill health worldwide (WHO, 2017). The common explanation for mental illness is bio-medical and personal, focusing on chemical imbalance and traumatic experience, with pharmacological cures. However research is growing which considers a more existential, systemic and politico-economic cause, suggesting that these high and increasing rates are in fact emanating from our way of life: from the loss of meaning

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<sup>8</sup> National debt in the UK as of July 2017 is approaching £1.8 trillion, an increase of almost £1 trillion since the first austerity policies were put into place (ONS, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> In Marxist economic theory, or *systemic risk* within neoclassical economics, the internal contradictions are a series of processes which perpetuate crisis: wage repression > profit growth > oversupply > reduced demand (because of low wages) > credit bubble (to survive on low wages) > widespread defaults > cascading bank and business failures > economic crisis with pockets of competitive advantage > geographic relocation and re-ignition of the cycle (Harvey, 2010).

or purpose of life (Roberts, 2007), the precarity, competitiveness and individualism of neoliberalism (James, 2007), and the nature of capitalist modernity (Fisher, 2009). Says David Graeber: *“The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it”* (Jeffries, 2015). The present system degrades sources of human wellbeing<sup>10</sup> such as community, cooperation, participation, leisure, freedom and generosity, fosters causes of mental ill health, and fails to adequately fund its treatment (Fullfact, 2016). Understanding the interrelation between the economic system and daily and inner life is necessary to treat the causes of this psychological pandemic, and to move beyond pathologising, medicalising and pacifying the legitimate symptoms of a dysfunctional paradigm.

***Societal and Global Inequality:*** Oxfam figures showing that 8 men own the same wealth as the poorest half of humanity have come to be expected each year (Oxfam, 2017); the fact that the wealthiest 1%<sup>11</sup> of humans own more wealth than the rest of the planet (Credit Suisse, 2016) has become sloganised; and the reality of average 70:1 CEO-to-worker pay scales, with instances of 434:1 (Payscale, 2017) and 1,795:1 (Thompson, 2013) are unsurprising. What is significant here beyond the figures and their passive acceptance are the structural dynamics of a system that by its very functioning concentrates income toward a minority of individuals, and has been accelerating that accumulation throughout the decade following the global financial crisis (Garside, 2015). Given the material insufficiency of half of the planet’s population - over 3 billion people live on less than \$2.50 a day (Chen & Ravallion, 2008) - and that 1.9 billion adults globally are overweight while half a billion are malnourished (WHO, 2017a), the rebalancing of consumption away from the developed world is not merely an ethical imperative but a physical necessity. Even within ‘developed’ economies there is structural maldistribution which epitomises irrationality yet has become normalised and accepted. That the world’s 5th largest economy is home to 250,000 homeless people (Richardson, 2016) and 200,000 empty homes (Inman, 2017); that obesity and hunger exist side-by-side; that our

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<sup>10</sup> The New Economics Foundations’s ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’ uses empirical evidence to show that social connection, physical activity, time and freedom to experience and reflect on the world, learning new skills, and giving to others or volunteering with the community are the most important day-to-day actions to foster and maintain wellbeing (nef, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Defined currently as ownership of a minimum \$744,400 in assets (Credit Suisse, 2016)



species is technologically able to provide not only for the needs of all<sup>12</sup> but the wellbeing of all too<sup>13</sup>, yet allows an economic system to persist which is based fundamentally upon over- and under- accumulation should be all the indictment that is required to spur action. The population of the planet is locked-in to structural, systemic economic - and thus political - injustice, and only the democratisation of politics and the economy can prevent the build up to violent social conflicts that such inequality has provoked in the past.

### **Distillation: ‘Neoliberal Capitalist Hegemony’**

My distillation of the above - the ideology, the source, the driver of these and many other negative impacts both globally and locally, socially and personally, the edifice to be tackled by the municipal movement - is the concept of *neoliberal capitalist hegemony*. It is more than each thing separately, each word taken alone. The dominance emerges from the hyper-extractive, accelerated exploitation of neoliberalism; the decades-long, multiple-crisis persistence and global single-story of capitalism; and the totalising socio-cultural, political and ideational suppression of their hegemony. An attempt at a brief definition of each follows, before (finally!) moving into a definition of municipalism and the more pleasurable discussion of the hope and potential which lies ahead.

- Neoliberalism’s key features are the “*belief in sustained economic growth to achieve human progress, its confidence in free markets as the most-efficient allocation of resources, its emphasis on minimal state intervention in economic and social affairs, and its commitment to the freedom of trade and capital*” (Smith, 2017). A more vociferous definition would mention the desire to commodify and privatise public goods and organic life and to deregulate all activity, ownership and trade in order to extract maximum profit, in the process “*exempt[ing] billionaires and large corporations from the constraints of*

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<sup>12</sup> Enough food is produced globally to provide every person with 2,700 calories per day, yet globalised food and economic systems, regional effects from climate change, the raising of meat, the imposition of export-focused policies, among many other factors, maintain this maldistribution (UN FAO, n.d.).

<sup>13</sup> There is enough wealth in the United States that every family of 4 could receive \$220,000 (Alperovitz, 2017).

*democracy, from paying their taxes, from not polluting, from having to pay fair wages, from not exploiting their workers"* (Monbiot, 2017). Neoliberalism is an *"ideological framework for sweeping away power of people by power of money and corporations, [...] defining human beings by the market"* (Monbiot, 2017), and has brought about both the depoliticisation and prioritisation of the economy over the state (Foucault, 1979). Capitalism is regularly prefixed by 'neoliberal' (as it is also by 'crony', 'corporate', 'rentier', 'patrimonial', etc.), implicitly suggesting that neoliberal capitalism is a particular 'brand' of capitalist logic and not in fact a *hyper-concentrate* of its fundamental essence.

- Capitalism can be defined encyclopedically as the private ownership of the means of production and the guidance of production and distribution of income by the market (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017). It is an economic system in which everything, natural, material, and intellectual, becomes a standardised and exchangeable commodity - wheat, vegetables, houses, iPhones, cluster bombs. Thomas Piketty showed that the rate of return on capital always exceeds the rate of growth in income, inscribing in the functioning of the system a structural inequality in which an ever-increasing surfeit of benefit goes to those already possessing financial wealth while the waged, salaried or unemployed receive an ever-diminishing real-terms share, and which only deliberate intervention can stop (Piketty, 2014). Capitalism is founded on competition and private profit and its ethos has spread into the makeup of social life, overshadowing cooperation and the common good as societal means and ends. At its present stage it is no longer an economic system but a social, cultural and political organising principle - even, as Mark Fisher claims, stretching into our psychology and imagination to shape the world that we see and eclipse our ability to conceive of alternatives (Fisher, 2009).
- Hegemony is *"social and cultural predominance [...] by one group within a society"* (Oxford English Dictionary, 2017), and though it connotes rule and leadership it is distinct from authoritarianism in its power to garner *consent* by shaping the *particular* values of the dominant group as the societal *universal* or 'common sense'. What is maybe more at issue than the ideas of neoliberalism and capitalism is this transformation of a particular set of ideas from 'one-among-many' ways of organising an economy to the neutral, universal and

unquestioned superstructure of society, as epitomised by Margaret Thatcher's famous pronouncement that 'there is no alternative'. Neoliberal capitalism persists because of its hegemony; because of the neutralisation of its politics into common sense; and because of its infiltration of the perceptive and imaginative level of those who live within it, suppressing the potential of conceiving of and enacting alternatives. It does not persist because of its rationality, efficiency or ability to provide wellbeing; it persists because of its economic and political power and the lack of a coherent, compelling and widely-witnessed alternative. The countervailing politics of 20th and 21st century social democracy, succeeding through gaining compromises from this already-established hegemony, serve to reinforce its dominance. Social reproduction operates through the institutions, social relations and ideas that make up society, so these are the areas that are contested by the municipal movement's *counter-hegemonic* politics.

As the far-from-anti-capitalist philosopher Alain de Botton states (2014, 8.50s), "*at this point in history we should all be Marxists, in the sense of agreeing with his diagnosis of our troubles. But we need to go out and find the cures that really will work*". It is my belief that a municipal political programme constitutes such a systemic cure *and* a break from the hegemonic ideas of the past.

## What is Municipalism?

*“The ancient concepts of freedom, self-organisation and citizen-ownership are the cornerstones of the new municipal movement.”*

Romy Krämer, Guerilla Foundation

Municipalism constitutes a coherent form with a diverse, plural content. The form is geographical and human, a community identified by the shared subjectivity of place, by the socially and humanly-scaled, by the proximity of decision-making to decision-bearing, by connection and understanding in place of dislocation and fear. The content is all of the ways in which material rationality and social justice are subverted by the mainstream, centralised, hierarchical and economic forms of organisation. Municipalism is gradually becoming a common container for broad identity struggles, for fights against specific effects of economic policies, and for desires to liberate daily life from the stultification of competitive capitalist logic. It is a home for - in the sense of lending systemic coherence and emancipatory trajectory to - the feminisation of politics<sup>14</sup>, resistance to structural racism, the reprioritisation of ecology, the reclamation of democracy, the protection of public services, opposition to the commodification of land and housing, the diversification of ways of living, producing and exchanging (physically and metaphysically), and the scaling-back of geopolitical imperialism, to name but a few.

It is clear that this is something different from typical left wing politics: in both theory and action it is beyond protest, beyond homogenous ideological revolution, and beyond ‘third way’ compromises in representative politics. In many ways it is also beyond ‘left wing’ as it exceeds the ideological political party and functions through engagement rooted in diverse, plural communities. Municipalism facilitates a ‘prefigurative politics’ in which the *ends* are entwined with and embodied by the *means*. Social and material relations and organisation are undertaken in the political or revolutionary process as they are desired in the outcome, so that enfranchisement, participation, horizontalism, equality and transparency take the place of centralised or vanguardist organising and ethical hypocrisy, with all of the

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<sup>14</sup> In this context this refers not merely to equalising the sexes present in political life but overcoming masculine tropes in politics. Regardless of gender, politics must move beyond the strong, decisive, dominant leader and allow for questioning, reflection, uncertainty and compassion.

positive psychological and experiential impacts that brings, whilst its direct engagement with the extant political structures enables successes to directly impact on existing power relations and to be witnessed as a part of people's daily lives. It is not about campaigning for someone else to make the change, it is about opening up power to make changes directly. Municipalism combines the evocative Latinate *free city* with the practical structure of local government. Within a 'New Municipalism' context the political level most closely connected to the population is not merely an enabler of the democratic black holes of Westminster and Washington, where capital is the most powerful constituent, but becomes an autonomous unit<sup>15</sup> able to actively administrate the wishes of the community, arrived at through the engagement with and participation of its members as *citizens*, distinct from merely *constituents* or *taxpayers*. As C. Douglas Lummis puts it, "*democracy doesn't mean putting power some place other than where the people are*" (Lummis, 1996, p.18).

The practice of municipal politics, its organisational capability and vision of its emancipatory potential beyond the small scale has existed for centuries. British connotations may still be with the municipal socialism of the 1980s in which local government was used to pursue socialist aims. While that was a municipal *entryism* in order to expand a governing ideology (which may well have led to centralisation overshadowing the local for the national), the new municipal movement could be framed as a political or democratic *hack*, gaining power through democratic means in order to 'crack open' the institution to the demos, to the people - to plurality, discourse and community, not ideology.

The articulation of it as a movement - as *The New Municipalism* - and the language of transnationalism and of coherent local-global challenge to the neoliberal State is newly re-imagined. The first 'international municipalist summit' took place in June 2017 in Barcelona and offered a place in which people from diverse struggles and backgrounds - from councillors in New York, democracy campaigners in Hong Kong, survivors of ethnic civil war in Juba, South Sudan, and women fighting for democracy in the face of ISIS in Kurdistan - could meet and share ideas, perspectives and experience on this growing emancipatory possibility. Because the movement is about form and function to tackle, democratically, hierarchy,

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<sup>15</sup> That is autonomous *from hierarchy* **but** *inter-reliant* with other communities - discussed further as 'confederalism' below.

domination, and economic injustice, the diversity of issues that stem from these roots can be expressed in all of their cultural specificity - there is no commonly agreed-upon definition or coordination of municipalist activities, which is in part the point. Municipalism is a 'political culture' (Caccia, 2017) and democratic form that can be applied wherever a struggle requires a horizon that takes it beyond disparate resistance and protest, beyond isolated critiques, beyond distant goals and non-systemic means, and beyond the impotence and overwhelm of the scale of the global crisis. It is best epitomised by the image of the global 'movement of the squares' surging into the institutions: it is discontent beyond resistance, protest made productive - a way to "*connect the militants, researchers and local authorities who, without talking about it directly, try to achieve this essential utopia, the right to the city*" (Mathivet, 2017).

Before going into the case study of Barcelona en Comú I will explore some of the existing literature that has fed into and influences this movement and my perspective on it, and which gives theoretical direction and analytical coherence to its diverse expressions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*“The oligarchical character of economic life threatens democracy. Libertarian municipalism proposes that land and enterprises be placed increasingly in the custody of the community.*

*In such a municipal economy [...] we would expect that the special interests that divide people today into workers, professionals, managers and the like would be melded into a general interest in which people see themselves as citizens guided strictly by the needs of their community.”*

Murray Bookchin, *The New Municipal Agenda*

### Murray Bookchin's Libertarian Municipalism

The municipal movement appears as a new political imaginary slowly giving language and direction to an organically occurring political current of decentralisation and democratisation, for many presenting for the first time a perspective and a programme that moves beyond the duality of free markets and state socialism as well as beyond identity politics, protest and abstract notions of belonging based on state and nation. However this political idea - of scale, proximity, true democracy and systemic opposition to capitalist hegemony and hierarchical domination - is not in fact being born but more accurately being given new life and light by these emerging political movements. That praxis is often preempting the theory is a sign that the direction of this movement is guided by a thorough, rational and grounded understanding of the sources of the crises.

Murray Bookchin is a name synonymous with municipalism. Bookchin was a social and political theorist and originator of social ecology, the critical social theory which states that problems of ecology stem ultimately from problems of society, specifically that *“economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most serious ecological dislocations we face today”* (Bookchin, 1993). Libertarian municipalism<sup>16</sup> is the political programme of social ecology. Bookchin was a holistic and systemic thinker, a non-academic high-theorist and a union-organising factory worker, a pragmatist and a utopian. His political trajectory over seven decades, from young communist to anarchist to municipalist reflects a continual critical reflection on the nature of changing political

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<sup>16</sup> As I go on to explain, ‘libertarian’ as used by Bookchin is definitively and essentially antonymous to the more contemporary conception, particularly in the United States, of ‘absolute freedom’.

realities and potentialities and a commitment to essential ethical principles of equality, socio-economic justice, ecological sustainability, true democracy and above all, the *rational* organisation of society to enable liberation and human flourishing.

Bookchin wrote specifically about the decentralised direct-democratic municipal politics that make up libertarian municipalism three decades ago in *From Urbanization to Cities: Toward a New Politics of Citizenship* (1992), building on his work on the politics of the city stretching back a further two decades to 1965's *Crisis in Our Cities*, and on the need for ecological harmony and a *humanly-scaled* society in the face of alienating 'megapolitan life' in *Our Synthetic Environment* (Bookchin, 1962). In *From Urbanization to Cities* Bookchin set out his comprehensive political project that is today being enacted, at different scales, to different extents, and in starkly differing contexts, from Burlington, USA to Barcelona, Spain to Bakur, Kurdistan. This work is finding its audience today among activists of the various movements, such as Occupy and the Indignados, that emerged in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and during the ensuing acceleration of neoliberal austerity policies, to take up physical urban space in order to resist, to discuss and to create a new political trajectory. The experience of these new ad hoc political spaces of anarchistic organisation, horizontal coordination, cooperation, familiarity and face-to-face discourse, and maybe most importantly the transformation - for a few, for a while - of the existential nature of everyday life, undoubtedly changed the political consciousness of those involved, but left the question, as progress and mobilisation waned, of how to retain momentum as their physical presences dissipated and the status quo persisted. The growing awareness of the need to take these radical democratic practices - the public assemblies, the directly democratic decision-making, the cooperation - into the institutions as they exist today in order to effect change was a natural next step, and in libertarian municipalism is conveniently met with a theoretical framework built for this exercise.

Bookchin's vision is both utopian and practical, short and long-term, with a maximum programme of the creation of the global *commune of communes* inhabited by a humanity liberated from domination and unnecessary toil, and a minimum programme of the acquisition of local democratic power to dissolve the walls between electors and elected. Distinct from anarchist non-participation,



socialist state-centred revolution, and extra-political protest, municipalist activists can engage in local, municipal and city politics as they operate today, on the understanding that once in office they open up the institution to devolve their power to the community, constituted in a popular assembly<sup>17</sup>. Bookchin's "*most important concern*" through libertarian municipalism "*is to stop the centralization of economic and political power*" (Bookchin, n.d.), and the creation of local institutions such as assemblies and councils at the neighbourhood level is his theoretical and practical way to achieve not only this (negative) aim, but to engage and utilise all of the positivity and wisdom that he believes can emerge from humanity when organised at the human-scale, in communities, free from the subversion of economic and political vested interests.

This municipalist project operates explicitly against capitalism and against the state, and the next step from acquiring and opening out local political power is "*to try to disengage cities and towns from the state by mutually confederating with each other and developing [a] network where resources can be moved back and forth*" (Bookchin, n.d.). This is achieved through the confederation or alliance of local political entities - the villages, towns and city neighbourhoods - into a mutually sufficient social system able to address the negative impacts stemming from the scale, dislocation, social alienation and ecological destruction of the capitalist political and economic system and the centralised state. In the context of a United States increasingly terrorised by its catastrophic President wherein the usual forms of democratic discourse, constitutional moderation and public protest are appearing increasingly impotent, this route to a *counterpower* is both a short and long-term strategy *against* the reactionary degradation of democratic politics and a looming descent into fascism, and *for* the maximisation of wellbeing and human potential.

Bookchin manages to resist a number of weaknesses of the historic and contemporary left, such as allowing ideology to distract, fragment and become disembodied from everyday, popularly comprehensible life; and a politics confined

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<sup>17</sup> The public assembly as an "institution of popular power" (Bookchin & Taylor, 2015) is subject to criticism (notably Žižek [2017]; Thucydides [Ober, n.d.]), often around its demands on time, ability to reach decisions, functionality at mass scales, and potential to reach widely-varying, non-empirical decisions. For Arendt they are a "lost treasure" of the revolutionary tradition (Arendt, 1990); for Barber (1984) it is about "some participation some of the time"; for me the idea is more important (at this stage) than practice, in the sense of Char (quoted in Arendt, 1968): "*At every meal that we eat together, freedom is invited to sit down. The chair remains vacant, but the place is set*".

to a negative, anti- and oppositional position. In placing democracy and freedom at the core of this political vision, retaining a strong faith in the capacity of 'ordinary people' to engage in political affairs, and ultimately crowning ecological, economic and ethical needs with the goal of human emancipation and creativity, citizens are invited to commit to creating this future rather than being limited to bemoaning the present, overcoming the disconnect between "*day-to-day activities and their utopian aspirations*" and the "*lack of ability to assess the general situation and initiate a general project*" (Quail, 1978) that has for me been at the heart of the struggle to combat the neoliberal project. Possibly the most significant break with past and present economic ideologies, however, and the most useful to focus on in the context of new economics, is the locating of ownership and enterprise not in the hands of a private sector or a centralised state bureaucracy (as per socialism), or with workers as in a traditional co-operative, but to have them embedded in their communities. Bookchin points to the Basque federation of worker's cooperatives, Mondragon, as an example of the limits of an enterprise operating within the capitalist system to go against its structural logic and economic imperatives of growth and competition. In expanding their operations economically to the scale of €25 billion (Mondragon, 2014) and geographically to Asia and Latin America, they have taken on non-member workers, low-paid and temporarily-contracted wage labourers, and undoubtedly impacted the environment (Kasmir, 2017). While supportive, Noam Chomsky cautions that "*they do things that are harmful to the society as a whole and they have no choice. If you're in a system where you must make profit in order to survive, you're compelled to ignore negative externalities, effects on others*" (Chomsky, 2012). Gar Alperovitz (2017) too cautions the need to move "*beyond pure worker-ownership towards more expansive models of interconnected democratic ownership*" to harmonise the needs of the community with the needs of a cooperative's members. Municipalism presents a framework in which this can take place, where the interests of the community as a whole can secure priority over the narrow interests of capital or of 'workers' compartmentalised from 'citizens', business from ecology. It's important to remember that the perfect should not be an enemy of the good - Mondragon is unarguably a fantastic example of alternative business practices, of the solidaristic nature of human cooperation, and of the productivity and innovation that can accompany fairness in working

conditions and pay<sup>18</sup> - but it should not be uncritically promoted or its model fetishised. Maintaining a perspective on what is a *break* from capitalist constraints versus what is merely a *brake* on its worst aspects is necessary to achieving long-lasting structural change, and for Bookchin municipalism offers this possibility.

It's possible to view the dialectical nature of Bookchin's thinking and to bring out its potential for overcoming the dualistic (and *duelistic*) extremes of centralisation and individualisation, as well as between the re-creation of forms of domination and an anti-political withdrawal from social and economic realities, by locating it between the political writing of two other theorists, Simon Critchley and Slavoj Žižek.

### Simon Critchley's Interstitial Resistance and Anarchic Metapolitics

In *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (2007), Critchley sets out an appealing analysis of present political dysfunction based upon the 'motivational deficit' at the heart of secular liberal democratic institutions and, metaphysically, at the core of modernity<sup>19</sup>. Responding to the resultant *passive nihilism*, as well as its *active*, fundamentalist obverse, Critchley sees the *extra-political* mobilisation of 'non-electoral engagement and activism', the movements, groups, networks and NGOs addressing the issues stemming from the status quo. The failures of the current system and its demotivating effects have conversely *remotivated* sections of society to form new political subjectivities - a multiplication of identities and specific sites of opposition to capitalist alienation and externalities, rather than a concentrating homogenisation of class-based opposition as envisioned by Marx. For Critchley the theoretical problem is one of naming and making a common claim from this plurality, after which comes an undertaking of politics *away from* the state: "*the task of radical political articulations is the creation*

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<sup>18</sup> Mondragon is based on the core principle of the sovereignty of labour over capital; maintains a close remuneration ratio between managerial and worker salaries; protected jobs during the economic crisis; and involves workers in business decisions. (Kasimir, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> By which I refer to the loss of meaning and purpose in the life of the individual and of society - the understanding of how and why to live - as a result of the current historical period referred to as 'modernity', or more specifically *capitalist modernity*. The premise is that our post-Enlightenment understanding of the world through science, our post-industrial control of the planet through technology, along with a postmodern self-consciousness renders Western civilisation "*burdened by understanding*" (Szasz, 1960) and "*condemned to be free*" (Sartre, 1946) in a world in which community, tradition and mystery have been replaced by individualism and the consumption of material goods.

*of interstitial distance within the state territory*” (p.92). This is the central concept in the *anarchic metapolitics* that Critchley describes, based upon resistance and autonomy from the existing structures of power. Whilst conceptualising the political as existing in all places and at all times is a radical counterpoint to the reduction of politics under representative democracy to parliament and elections, the failure to engage with institutions as they exist here and now - instead working in the ‘cracks’ of society - though far from being unique to Critchley’s take on anarchism, makes the difference between a broadly-appealing and practicable politics to stem and reverse the degradation of democracy, and a philosophical-ideological treatise for an academic audience (in which there is nothing wrong, I should add).

Whereas Bookchin’s confederal municipal politics can be considered an alternative programme, Critchley’s politics of resistance remains, despite its great appeal, a negative position. What Critchley adds to Bookchin’s perspective however is the notion of ethical experience - of a felt injustice constituting a ‘metapolitical moment’ that yields an ‘internally compelling’ (rather than ‘externally compulsory’) political commitment. This idea of political mobilisation from felt, embodied moments - in which “disquiet” at an injustice, discussed between plural individuals with reference to a particular situation, can bring about a group felt sensing of problems and solutions, with the aid of theories, not through them (Shotter, 2014), an idea that was also central to the politics and practice of the Situationists - lends a human, emotional dimension to Bookchin’s tendency to place an overly-rationalistic reason alone at the heart of political engagement.

### Slavoj Žižek’s Bureaucratic Centralism

I will not undertake an analysis of Žižek’s hefty philosophy here but will simply set out a specific and central aspect of his thought which counterposes Critchley’s and highlights the practicality and potentiality of Bookchin’s municipalism.

Žižek’s political imaginary is of large-scale, wide-reaching, top-down, centralised policymaking and enforcement. His revolutionary desire is for the acquisition of power by a “*big, strong*” centralised state with left wing political and economic ideology, or even (preferably) a supranational government akin to the EU, but

without its neoliberal economic policy (Channel 4 News, 2017). His reasoning is persuasive - that capital is global, powerful, universalising, and therefore its opposition must be a “*strong efficient bureaucracy*” on a large-scale able to apply across nations and cultures to counter global capitalist dynamics. His characterisation of the movement toward local, direct, non-representative politics is one of “chaos”. As is usual with Žižek his point contains much that I can agree with, and yet his conclusions fail the positivity, enfranchisement and practicability tests. This solution is not one suited to the present current of socio-politics. For one, at a time of reactionary nationalism and growing fascism, many of those most impacted by the globalisation, corporatism and capitalism that drives this trend do not automatically - indeed increasingly rarely - identify as left wing (an opposition to socialism among the working classes that is in no way new, as William Morris in 1890 and Robert Tressell in 1909 made clear). Opposition to rightwing economic policy (its effects, if not its idea) finds a path of least resistance sloping toward right wing social policy of distraction and blame, leaving the system ever emboldened. Thus the idea that ‘the whole system’ can be taken charge of by the left on a national and supranational level is dependent upon an unrealistic shift in the perception and voting action of the electorate and the electoral systems that exist. More than this, one of the key factors in this rightward shift in the UK and US is the sense of powerlessness, of a lack of control over decisions being made elsewhere by a political elite that do not understand the problems faced by ordinary people. This is a core problem not addressed by large-scale, centralised revolution.

These two factors alone make agitation for a revolutionary left wing supra-government both undesirable and highly unlikely. It is, again, not an alternative programme but a negatory, oppositional, vanguardist perspective that, while having analytical merit, does nothing to tackle the most febrile and fertile aspects of the discontent that rests in the disconnection and disempowerment of communities by large-scale centralised hierarchical government. I contend that local political action that fosters economic democracy and vests decision-making with communities - as part of a larger, transnational confederation - is both practically and theoretically the most plausible and effective way of countering neoliberal economic power and neofascist social agitation; of being necessarily plural and thus truly political.

## Arrighi, Hopkins & Wallerstein's Anti-systemic Movements

Žižek's view of the necessity of scale and centralisation to counter the power of capital is challenged too by the world systems perspective of Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein (1989). Though they write with reference to the two decades post-1968, their concept of *anti-systemic movements* applies well to the second decade of the twenty-first century. In their book *Anti-systemic Movements* they propose the need to reconstruct the strategy and organisational structure of world movements to tackle the logic of global capitalism, but they identify the limits of organising at the level of the state for the acquisition of state power. The two-stage process of acquiring power and then 'changing the world' has failed to abate the system. Instead, their expectation (in 1989) is for the emergence of world-scale organisational responses to capitalism. The theory and praxis of transnational organising for moving beyond the state as the 'key political structure' of the world is left open at the end of the book - it is only known that it will take 'human organisation and revolutionary programs' - but it is clearly ripe for marrying-up with the political structure and anti-systemic possibilities of municipalism. By taking protest and resistance to the institutions, by imbuing the spontaneity and transience of moments of rebellion with permanence and memory, the municipal movement offers the potential of overcoming the "*noncontinuity of rebellion*" (p.29) that has been relied upon by the status quo to prevent any significant, systemic, lasting challenge to its reproduction, as well as obviating the separation between the acquisition of power and the realisation of revolutionary change.

Capitalism is plastic, malleable, not only able to take the hit of a financial crisis or socio-economic failing and its subsequent mobilisation of dissent but to rebound and envelop the reaction, internalising the opposition within its operating sphere with the help of the State's maintenance of order. It is these "integrating tendencies" of capitalism that create tension within its various sites of resistance, notably between a reformist realism moderating its worst excesses but not questioning its immutability as a global system, and a revolutionary idealism against the co-opting power of the established order. It is, too, a movement "*born of hopes at least as much as discontents*" (p.98), vitally setting out *where it is going* as strongly as *what it wants to leave behind*. The municipal movement, like the anti-systemic movements, takes the form of a rhizomic resistance, a horizontally structured

systemic response to the failures across ecological, social, political, economic and spiritual planes, with vertical replicability across diverse political structures (the local, regional, municipal levels of political activity). Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein claim that the revolution of 1848 against feudalism ‘institutionalised the old left’ in newly independent nations, and the revolution of 1968 ‘institutionalised the new social movements’ against the global dominance of the United States. The lessons learned from both experiences are of the need for political and cultural organisation (in place of spontaneity) in order to confront the bureaucratised, hegemonic state. The confluence in today’s context would seem to be the institutionalisation of contemporary social movements not within the physical and ideological container of the state (i.e. by taking state power), but openly, transnationally within the container of the municipality or city. While Žižek would use the same structures as existed in 1968 to solve these problems, Bookchin, Critchley and the anti-systemic thinkers see both the potential and the power in taking Einstein’s observation and using different tools (the municipality as opposed to the state) and different thinking (unity in diversity as opposed to individuality or homogeneity; holism and rationality as opposed to hierarchy and capital) to avoid recreating the same conditions and same failures as the past.

Bookchin’s municipalism thus sits centrally between these two poles, not existing autonomously in the cracks of capitalist society nor advocating a wholesale revolution for the establishment of a Marxist state apparatus. It is anti-systemic but not in a suppressive way (as, say, the megalith of Soviet communism resisting the power of capitalism but also destroying ecology, human freedom and life in the process). Municipal and regional politics are a *“new axis distinct from the longue duree 120 years of state socialist and nationalist revolts against the established order”* (Wallerstein, 2002). If a new system is to emerge and to sustain, it must *“meet the dynamism and flux of everyday life under capitalism”* (Plan C, 2012), not be a rigid formulation based on past situations and old ideologies.

### Gar Alperovitz’s Principles of a Pluralist Commonwealth

Gar Alperovitz’s *Principles of a Pluralist Commonwealth* (2017) reinforces this perspective of revolutionary actions without revolutionary fervour - a ‘rational

revolution', if you like. It focuses on democratising economic institutions and public services, building community, changing cultural narratives as well as institutions, argues for the need to decentralise and democratise politics in the United States and, with Schumacher, to keep decision making at the lowest level possible (*subsidiarity*), and the need to address systemically and structurally racial and gender inequalities, among many other holistic, thorough and practical suggestions. Gar's history and expertise as a political economist in government who has maintained a highly critical eye on the unjust and ineffective ways in which the present political and economic systems function has enabled him to produce a sweeping raft of suggestions which bridge the gap between a tame, reformist response to the deep seated social, political and economic orthodoxies, and a radical, autonomist disengagement from mainstream institutions. It is, in a sense, a collection of policy proposals just waiting for a municipalist platform like Barcelona en Comú to put them into practice. Beyond discussion of the remunicipalisation of energy utilities Alperovitz does not mention municipalism as a political project, however his proposals lay out much of the foundation upon which a municipalist platform would need to work. The symbiosis between activists, communities and institutions - the dynamism of *without* and *within* - has the potential to lend resilience and integrity to the creation of counter institutions and to offer the organisational and ideational coherence to bring about the *pluralist commonwealth* of which he dreams.

### Laclau & Mouffe's Socialist Strategy & Radical Democracy

In their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985) Laclau and Mouffe identify the "*difficulty of constituting a popular anti-system pole*" and the problem of constructing a 'clear and empirical' dividing line between antagonists as the crucial problem of politics. They critique the applicability of a economically-reductionist Marxist class-based struggle in the current situation, seeing it as "*incapable of constructing a vision of the political which would recapture the complexity and the plurality peculiar to the social in industrial societies*" (p.135). Adjusting to the reality of a complex and plural social sphere - in which not only workers struggle against economic exploitation but people with diverse identities struggle against multiple forms of social and structural



subordination - and constructing a “*radically libertarian and infinitely more ambitious*” political imaginary will require a plurality of ‘moments of rupture’ and ‘spaces for constituting the political’. This I see as the opening in their (33-year-old) discourse for the new municipal horizon, and indeed Chantal Mouffe in a later interview, though not speaking with reference to the municipal movement, seems to agree when she says that:

*“the radicalization of democracy should be envisaged as an immanent critique, a struggle, that does not imply a radical break but that can be done through a profound transformation of the existing liberal democratic institutions. Of course, this will require some important changes, some institutions will need to be created, others will need to be radicalized, but the point is that it is possible to work through these institutions. If we accept that the ethical political principles of liberal democracy are liberty and equality for all, it is clear that there is no need to look for more radical principles. The problem with really existing liberal democratic societies is that they are not putting those ideals into practice”* (Mouffe, 2014).

As with Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein’s analysis, today appears to present a period of confluence or synthesis of conflicting facets of the struggle against capitalist hegemony, in their case in the merging of the state and the social movement as organising principles and bases for action, while in Laclau and Mouffe’s it is the worker and the social identity, the economic and the subjective uniting against subjugation. “*Democratizing the republic and radicalizing the democracy*” (Bookchin, n.d.) is an essential aspect of Murray Bookchin’s municipalist theory which appears embedded in Laclau and Mouffe’s highly theoretical text, so it is no surprise that this has formed a significant reference point for the academics behind the rise of Podemos in Spain (Hancox, 2015) and the new wave of municipal politics. The third confluence, that of the theoretical and the practical, is the most important. Taking critique beyond the academy and beyond the square, and indeed beyond critique itself into creation and realisation in the institutions, communities and structures of governance as they exist now, is the surest way to effect change. As I will show with my brief discussion of the political changes undergone in the town of Frome, this practice can emerge from an ‘everyday’ analysis of the nature of our democracy just as easily as from such dense political theory as that above (or below).

## The Democratic Thread in Continental Philosophy

As a final note it is instructive to mention the current within Continental political philosophy which flows into this critique of the contemporary form of liberal representative democracy, capitalist social relations, and the State. The writing of Alain Badiou on democracy beyond the state and parliament; Jacques Ranciere on 'post-democracy'; Miguel Abensour on 'insurgent democracy' distinct from the state; Giorgio Agamben on withdrawal and autonomy from structures of governance and the status quo as non-democratic and anti-political; Boaventura de Sousa Santos on the challenge within and between differing conceptions of democracy; Jacques Derrida on democracy as a 'signifier' disconnected from its definition<sup>20</sup>, along with many others in this and other traditions<sup>21</sup>, all lend credibility and theoretical weight to the absolute need to purposefully and combatively reassert and reimagine both the conception and functioning of democracy and the political units within and through which it operates. In responding to the shifting political expressions of protest in public squares, the 'destitution' of mainstream politics, and the existential malaise at the core of daily life under neoliberalism, this thread appears to mark a confluence of the philosophical and the experiential, the negative and the possible, the destructive and the creative. Travis Holloway, in his essay on the range of philosophical critique of representative democracy under neoliberalism, conceptualises these works and many others as together signaling a choice between *constituent* and *destituent* forms of power, asking "*should disaffected citizens organize around popular protests and elections, or should they withdraw and dissolve the State's legitimacy through lack?*" (Holloway, 2017, p.30). It is here again, on the knife-edge between nihilism and engagement, that the municipal horizon offers a unifying and positive way forward, a *positive destituent power* of democracy beyond general elections and political parties, and simultaneously a *radical constituent power* of engagement with the decentralised structures of governance.

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<sup>20</sup> See Badiou - Metapolitics; Ranciere - Hatred of Democracy; Abensour - Democracy Against the State; Agamben - For a Theory of Destituent Power; de Sousa Santos - Democratizing Democracy; Derrida - The Last of the Rogue States: The "Democracy to Come," Opening in Two Turns.

<sup>21</sup> The political critiques of the above are made and extended into ontological and epistemological critiques of Eurocentrism and Western hegemony by Latin American scholars such as Gustavo Esteva, Enrique Leff, Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, among many others.

*“The growing momentum of local democratic initiatives seizing institutional power at a city level has great potential to address national and transnational political problems.”*

Giuseppe Caccia

## **Case Study: Barcelona en Comú**

### **From the Squares to the Institutions**

Spain offers the strongest vision of the municipalist movement so far and within the country Barcelona is the city to have gained status as its epicentre and global “*reference for political transformation*” (Shea Baird, Bárcena et al, 2016). Having emerged only relatively recently from the authoritarian dictatorship of Franco into a democratised Republic, Spanish politics - driven by its economic situation - has relatively quickly displayed the anti-democratic and unjust nature of centralised administration and neoliberal policies. Hit hard by the 2008 financial crisis, suffering high levels of unemployment and strict austerity measures imposed by the EU, as well as a legacy of corruption in politics and business, Spanish citizens and activists have been impelled to engage directly in resisting the continuation and worsening of this situation. As was the case in many countries where crisis was sufficient to mobilise, people took to the streets to protest, but whereas much of the mobilisation of Occupy in the United States and UK, Nuit Debout in France, and the Greek *aganaktismenoi* has subsided or become reformist or autonomist, the anti-austerity activism and organisation of *Movimiento 15M/Indignados* has achieved power within the municipal layer of the political establishment, leading to positive impacts both on tangible local political realities and within political imagination on a far larger scale.

The May 2015 municipal elections saw the mayors of Madrid and Barcelona, as well as mayors in smaller cities and towns like Zaragoza, Valencia, A Coruña, Cadiz, Pamplona and Santiago de Compostela, elected into office through citizen platforms. The platform is distinct from the party - in the case of Barcelona it included the insurgent new national party Podemos, the green coalition of Equo, the communist and socialist coalition United and Alternative Left and members of the Catalan left-independence movement working together with the aim of turning a

‘social majority’ into a ‘political majority’<sup>22</sup> (Caccia, 2017). Important to note is the precedence of *social* over *political* - as Kate Shea Baird of BComú explains (2015) it was the social movements and activists who drove the platforms which the political parties then lent their support to, not the other way around. Barcelona thus marks the place “*where the link between [social] movements and the electoral platform is most robust, and the line between activists and representatives is haziest*” (Delclós, 2017).

This kind of political organising marks a break from the party-centric rhetoric and maneuvering and the disconnected quest for the acquisition and maintenance of power which has alienated much of the public from political engagement, but which constitutes politics today. While working to overcome the historically inevitable schism of political parties on the left it was primarily the outward-looking engagement with the tangible realities of daily life for people in the city that secured the legitimacy of the platform with the citizens. In Barcelona the election coalesced around the specific issue of housing, and it is the former spokeswoman of the the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*, the grassroots campaigning and direct action group set up following the 2008 financial crisis to resist the growing wave of evictions, who is now mayor as a part of the coalition of Barcelona en Comú (‘Barcelona in Common’). The citizen or civic platform governs the city having received 25% of the vote and 11 out of 41 seats, significantly breaking the dominance of the socialist and conservative parties. The vote share - from 40% in the poorest region of the city and only 5% in the wealthiest - demonstrates the nature of this political shift and the voice that is now being given to the formerly voiceless. This was not achieved through political marketing and rhetoric but by the physical engagement of activists and soon-to-be politicians with these communities: neighbourhood assemblies and issue-specific panels were held to understand the issues being faced in different parts of the city; proposals were collected to unlock the collective wisdom of people to play a role in addressing their problems; and online discussion and voting tools used to prioritise issues and policies by neighbourhood. This is the type of political work which is most able to counteract

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<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to remember that 52% of UK voters in 2017 chose progressive or centre-left parties - Labour, Lib Dem, SNP and Greens, while only 44.2% opted for centre-right parties the Conservatives and UKIP (BBC, 2017). The electoral system on the national scale in the UK actively prevents this social majority from being represented as a political majority.

the manipulation of working class neighbourhoods into xenophobic, anti-immigrant scapegoating, to reinvigorate the electorate into political engagement, and to offer hope of an emancipatory, not merely countervailing, politics.

The right to housing, while one of the most pressing issues within the neoliberal city and across capitalist nations, is clearly not the sole issue affecting voters. What focusing on a specific, tangible symptom of the failed economic logic does is help to bring into view the root of the problem. In Barcelona's case it was a global financial crisis, a supranationally mandated and nationally-imposed austerity programme combined with socially unjust mortgage laws<sup>23</sup>, predatory landlords profiting from 'platform capitalism' and high levels of tourism by buying apartments to rent on airbnb (Burgen, 2017), and a market system that allows rent and purchase prices to inflate irrespective of residents' ability to pay which impact not only the issue of housing but many other facets of daily life in the city. A programme has thus spread out from the housing issue, based upon the neighbourhood engagement prior to the election, to address employment, privatisation, institutional privilege, economic inequality, tourism, healthcare, ecology and, most obviously, institutional reform and a reconceptualisation of democracy (Barcelona en Comú, 2017).

The location of the citizen platform, between centralised national and geopolitical priorities and party-political agendas on the one hand and single-issue extra-institutional political organising and protest on the other, offers a way to channel the energy, frustration and mobilisation of the social movements from the squares and the streets into the institutions of government. Freed from the national political narratives and to some extent from the intermediation of proposals through a critical media, and having gained the trust and engagement of the city's residents, BComú have been able to establish a radical proposition to overhaul and reconfigure the city government, to open up the institution to the public, and to sow the seeds for radical democracy to spread throughout the country. Municipal platforms are defying EU austerity logic, increasing social spending, defying unjust legislation and reaping 'conventional' economic success in the process. By bringing the combative phrase of the Indignados - "*we are neither right nor left, we are coming from the bottom and going for the top*" - into play at an institutional level they have attempted

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<sup>23</sup> In Spanish law homeowners must pay off mortgage debt in full even following default and repossession (Dowsett, 2013).

to *show* through specific issues, rather than to *claim* with ideological rhetoric, the ‘clear and empirical’ dividing line between antagonists that Laclau and Mouffe see as central to constituting the political, and in doing so reclaiming politics, the city and daily life from capital and neoliberalism.

The achievements in Barcelona and throughout Spain are incredibly significant for the fight against the current economic paradigm and *for* a better one, but the practice remains a long way from the institutionalisation of public assemblies, the overhaul of the representative system, and the strongly articulated counterpower of Bookchin’s communalist theory. It is important to maintain vision of a horizon to be worked towards, to support but also to interrogate the progress that is being made. Carlos Delclós in his essay assessing the performance of the wave of municipal victories after two years in place raises a number of points to be kept in mind if they are not to be “*absorbed into the structure of neoliberal institutionalism*” (Delclós, 2017). The most vital is to remain open to the voices of the social movements to ensure that a gap does not open between the two layers of antagonism<sup>24</sup>; to not become complacent with ‘holding the fort’ and resisting the imposition of neoliberal policies from above, but to ‘push back’ against the structural logic that impels them; to maintain the balance of the social agenda against the structurally oppressive forces of capitalist appropriation and exploitation, to not acquiesce to too moderate a position with regards the current mode of economics; and to avoid a cultural separation between the struggles in metropolitan cities and rural villages, given that the latter are being decimated by the same ideologies. In a beautifully simple summation he writes that their goal should be “*to create more uncertainty for speculators and less for those who hope to inhabit the city*”, and I would expand this beyond the city to eradicating material and existential uncertainty, needlessly perpetuated by economic and political systems, from the daily lives of all citizens. The next step in matching the practice to the theory is “*to dismantle the architecture and open it up to the people*”.

So where Franco said “*be like me and don’t meddle in politics*” (Kassam, 2015) - and the representative electoral politics that succeeded his dictatorship allows only for ‘meddling’ at allotted times and in superficial ways - the guiding idea of this new

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<sup>24</sup> Or as Hilary Wainwright put it, to *support* the work and efforts from below, not to lead or subsume them (Wainwright, 2017).

municipal politics exemplified by Barcelona en Comú is the reunification of politics with everyday life and the participation of citizens - indeed the *creation* of a *citizenry* out of a mass of *consumers*. This is at once a radical departure from the status quo and an *entirely ordinary* attempt to institute that which should already be present by definition: the rule of the people.

*“This is the thing to bomb. This is the beginning — from “I” to “we”.*

*If you who own the things people must have could understand this, you might preserve yourself. If you could separate causes from results, if you could know that Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know. For the quality of owning freezes you forever into “I”, and cuts you off forever from the “we”. The Western states are nervous under the beginning change. Need is the stimulus to concept, concept to action. A half-million people moving over the country; one million more restive, ready to move; 10 million more feeling the first nervousness.”*

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

### **Transnational Municipalism: Fearless Cities to Confederated Networks** Organising Beyond Borders: A Global Municipalist Network

Aware that this municipal movement must be internationalist if it is to form a coherent counter-hegemonic politics and bring about a sustainable liberation from the neoliberal policies of the EU and global capital, BComú’s international committee organised the first International Municipalist Summit, *Fearless Cities*, in Barcelona in June 2017. Having seen that BComú and the municipal movement “represents, for many people, the possibility of a real alternative” (Shea Baird, Bárcena et al, 2016) the conference was a chance to share and learn among diverse movements from wildly differing political, social and economic contexts and “to put the international context in the centre of municipal debates and municipalism in the centre of global debates.” The workshops and policy roundtables were designed to share experience of macro-scale political organisation, such as the feminisation of politics and the creation of public commons, and micro-scale social and economic issues like transport, public space and remunicipalised energy services, among the 600 participants, 180 towns and cities and 100 municipalist platforms in attendance from 40 different countries. The unity at the centre of this diversity was the motivation to work at local levels to challenge the “democratic deficit imposed by states and markets”, along with the values of mutual aid and solidarity that are central to the manifestation of municipalism. As if responding directly to Žižek’s criticisms those part of the international municipalist wave understand that “we face adversaries who cross borders [so] our response must also be transnational” (Shea



Baird, Bárcena et al, 2016), and believe that sufficient resistance can *swamp up* from below without the necessity of imposition from above.

Since previous upwellings of internationalist political, economic and social solidarity the communication, technology and transport landscape has changed dramatically. This creates a very different global landscape from the past and opens the possibility of organisation, cooperation, experience and solidarity to be shared across borders, leveraging the collective intelligence and experience of activists from all over the world to discover successes, failures, inspiration and solidarity. Importantly this connection, in building the municipal 'grammar', is not to fuel a one-dimensional, homogenous struggle as in previous times but to motivate, organise and facilitate a plethora of independent manifestations of the rejection of the status quo and claims on the state for greater democracy. Simply spreading knowledge of the various instances of municipal political activity is a vital first step in amplifying the movement's aims and one of the key tasks to have emerged from Fearless Cities is the mapping of municipalist platforms globally<sup>25</sup>.

Barcelona is a bellwether but it does not constitute the movement. The discontent present across the planet is in many places, through particular confluences, provoking citizens to organise. When viewed through the lens of municipal democratisation the many place-based movements organising around different issues - Zagreb je NAŠ! fighting corruption, Cooperation Jackson fighting economic and racial injustice, the Cynon Valley Party organising for their local community, Cambiamo Messina dal Basso mobilising around refugee support, the Polish Urban Movements Congress fixing issues of daily life, and Barcelona en Comú working for fair housing, among many others - can be seen to share much in common. Shifting from a history of disconnection between citizens, social movements and local and national government; between different strands of social movements; and between social movements in different countries, by coalescing diverse movements around the demand or enactment of genuine democratic local self-government - and formalising this connection through confederal networks of transnational mutual aid *below* and *beyond* the national layer of the state - is a fundamental evolution through which the social majority can be better able to resist, cultivate autonomy

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<sup>25</sup> See appendix for a list of movements in attendance at Fearless Cities.

from, and form a counterpower to the otherwise inexorable progress of neoliberal capitalist hegemony.

I deliberately use the term *transnational* in place of *international* to denote *across, through and beyond*, not simply *between*. In my conception of municipalism, borne of what I have read and of what I have experienced, the movement is not simply about multiplying the different struggles contained within national borders, escalating each manifestation within its political confinement. It is instead about creating a line of agonism, a border of contestation, that traverses the entity of the State, that operates across and irrespective of it. The combination of subnational social, political and economic entities - the diverse and specific communities at the base of the municipality - with transnational organising and a core of universalised articulations of solidarity and struggle is the response that I envision as necessary and able to tackle the transnationalism and the social, cultural and political homogenisation of global capital.

The horizon *beyond statehood* that exists at the zenith of libertarian municipalism is hard to conceive of but its birth, both theoretically and practically, is most tangibly underway within the depths of the ongoing Syrian crisis. The revolution in Rojava, more properly known today as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (Arafat, 2016), is the evolution of the historical Kurdish struggle for statehood. The movement here is worthy of a thesis all of its own, and certainly of a larger section than I can give it if its complexities and shades are to be properly understood. However, the main strand which is pertinent here is the shift from a nationalist struggle for a Kurdish homeland - a place where language, history, customs and identity can be expressed unsuppressed by the competing hegemonic states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria - to a municipalist struggle for autonomy from these states and liberation not only for the Kurdish identity but for the overcoming of all religious, sectarian, ethnic, economic, political, gender, national and ecological divisions and hierarchies. After decades of violence and death on both sides of the war between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish state, in the face of the power and brutality of NATO's second-largest army, and contending with a global branding as a terrorist organisation, the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan realised that statehood for the Kurds is not only an insurmountable struggle (Joint Statement of the International Peace Delegation, 2016) but would inevitably perpetuate the

violence, disconnection and domination of the existing state system - that the political entity of the centralised, large-scale state, within the context of national geopolitics and global capitalism, is inseparable from the suppression of difference, dissidence and dissent (Öcalan, 2011). His alternative, and today the governing political system of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, is *democratic autonomy* or *democratic confederalism*, a modified version of Murray Bookchin's libertarian municipalism<sup>26</sup> in which neighbourhood assemblies and regional councils administer a system of local autonomous self-government and a cooperative social economy, with a particular emphasis on fighting the patriarchy and sexism inherent in both regional and global institutions and society. Says Dr Jeff Miley, lecturer in political sociology at Cambridge University: "*Democratic confederalism is not about dissolving state borders, but transcending them. At the same time, it allows for the construction of a local, participatory democratic alternative to tyrannical states*" (Miley & Riha, 2015).

Though not uncontroversial (Hammy, 2017), the recent renaming of the autonomous region epitomises the shift in emphasis away from Kurdish exceptionalism (Rojava means 'west' in Kurmanji) to a more plural, holistic focus on all of the peoples of the area and to the deeper causes of alienation and conflict. Both this and the fundamental transformation from a singular nationalist struggle to a plural municipalist one could be seen as a dialectical synthesis, a deliberate *stepping out from* the perpetuation of that which already is by responding antithetically, instead opening up the possibility of moving beyond today's national-political common sense. Questioning the immutability of borders and the divisive effect that they have on organic communities of people, arbitrarily separating, suppressing, restricting and opposing through geopolitical happenstance, leads the inquisitive to question Sykes-Picot, Western hegemony, and a deeper level of complicity in the conflict in the Middle East<sup>27</sup>, before bringing that questioning back to closer shores. The local and municipal framework growing here, and its success in the face of ISIS barbarism (Khalaf, 2016) offers a radically different perspective on potential solutions to crises in this part of the world.

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<sup>26</sup> Öcalan studied Bookchin's work while imprisoned by the Turkish state and the two briefly conversed before the latter's death (Leverink, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Or the Arab World, to use a less Eurocentric but equally contentious nomenclature (see Hanafi, 1998).

The Steinbeck quote at the beginning of this section evokes for me the energy that is latent throughout the world, bound up in and by necessity, disconnection, disempowerment, and the simple lack of a popularly held conception of any alternative, just waiting for a positive outlet. We know that fear mobilises and division offers simple answers, but I retain the hope that the social majority persists, quietly, craving a political outlet distinct from the limited horizons of the present. The municipal form of governance allows for the complexity of the world, for material and metaphysical differences, for heterogeneity, for solidarity and shared values to together resist economic reductionism and homogenisation. As the *Guerilla Foundation* states, “*supporting the internationalisation of this important movement should be a priority for funders both from Europe and the US who want to support progressive values and politics*” (Krämer, 2017). The national question is one that will inevitably arise as political and psychic landscapes shift under new ideas, while the idea of the *supranational* is facing serious interrogation today as the next section discusses.

## DiEM25’s Democratisation of Europe and the Existential Break

For me the ‘Democracy in Europe Movement 2025’ - DiEM25 - constitutes a potential point of cleavage in the future of the municipal movement in Europe. The point of departure will depend upon how deeply - metaphysically - the content of the movement penetrates. DiEM25 and its founder, former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, offers a radical outline for the democratisation of Europe and the eradication of neoliberal economic policy, operating at local, regional, national and transnational scales. It shares members with many of the municipal platforms and actively encourages their work. But it presents to me a disjuncture between what I see as the *intra-paradigm* and *extra-paradigm* attempts at political and economic transformation.

The autonomist Marxist theorist and recent departee from the advisory panel of DiEM25, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, has come to epitomise this split, particularly with his latest book *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (2017). One of his central theses in the book is that power acts to limit what is possible: “*the road to emancipation unspools from an awareness that the field of the possible is*

*only limited, and not created, by the power structures behind it. Other futures and other worlds are always already inscribed within the present, despite power's attempt to keep them invisible.*" (Verso, 2017). My concern is that retaining existing national and supranational structures beyond the local, municipal - truly political - level and bringing them into the world that is being prefigured will act to obscure the possibility of a politics existing outside of such large scale, artificial, abstract and centralised institutional forms. The questioning, whether implicit or explicit, that is contained within the necessity of *proximity* and decentralisation to the municipal movement *against* the centralised and hierarchical political structures risks being curtailed, yet this is a questioning that is central to the evolution of politics beyond the confines of the present.

In simple terms, the goals of DiEM25 are good, admirable, necessary (and I am a member because I support them) but intra-paradigm - the point where they break with the present situation and the bifurcation that they pursue takes much of what already exists at an ontological, existential level for granted. While it challenges the financialisation, bureaucratisation and autocracy of the EU and aims at a salvaged, democratised public sphere at local, national and transnational levels (DiEM25, 2016), it brings with it the baggage of a consciousness forged by capitalist realism, by colonialism, and by existing borders and boundaries and remains blurry in its focus on the deeper core of the EU's actions and those of its nation states that perpetuate financial and physical violence throughout the continent and beyond. Whilst the EU's 'arms' pursue enlightened and laudable targets with relation to energy efficiency, renewable energy, cultural development and local political creativity, its operating system, its head, heart and lungs, according to Berardi's resignation letter to Yanis Varoufakis (Berardi, 2017), are structurally and politically complicit in the continuation of the refugee crisis, the growing nationalism and isolationism of some of its member states, and the impossibility of a peaceful Europe in the 21st century. Varoufakis believes, not unreasonably, that the EU can be disobeyed and re-democratised (or just *democratised*) by the motivation of rebel cities and municipal platforms in concert with nations and international cooperation, but whereas for Bookchin the horizontal confederal network of independent but intertwined municipalities *is* the 'pan-nationalism' - the confrontation leads to dissolution - for Varoufakis the EU architecture remains in place overarching the state, in turn overarching the city and the municipality (Varoufakis, 2017). As an

attempt to overcome the systemic causes of the present situation this outlook for me is rational but partial, temporary, and does not constitute a thorough analysis for a project that can work today *and* be carried through to the next socio-political paradigm.

Berardi writes in his latest book of the necessity of a *concatenation* - an interconnected series of events, or the emergence of a form - to transform a possibility into a subjectivity. He asks what concatenation - in my interpretation, what structure of resistance and creation, or what *anti-systemic movement* - will succeed those of liberal democracy (for the bourgeois class) and communism (for the industrial worker) to enable the emancipation of *the general intellect*<sup>28</sup> from the current unjust, self-destructing paradigm. He suggests that in order to succeed this possibility must have *potency* - 'internal consistency and projecting energy' - and must challenge the agency of power, that which is able to "*reduce the field of possibility to a prescriptive order*", to "*subjugate the soul*". It is my contention in this thesis that the theories and practices that have formed around the municipalist movement constitute such a concatenation, such a possibility. But, distinctly, it appears to me that they must arise *outside of* any supranational framework, outside of the associations with large-scale, top-down governance, and beyond a dependence of the artificial divisions of the political state in order to have this potency.

Berardi is a theorist and Varoufakis an economist-politician so I see no tension between the two perspectives - indeed I hold them both and have oscillated between them often. At present I could not stand uncritically behind either point of view, however, and I think a pragmatism which can balance the realities and constraints of the present situation with a long-sighted, penetrating, deeply critical understanding of where we stand - in the history of the formation of our collective consciousness, in what is fundamental and what is mutable, fleeting - is what is likely to cultivate the most coherent, multifaceted, *potent* political revolution. It is vital to instill the work being done from *within* - the short-to-mid-sighted

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<sup>28</sup> For Marx this is "*the knowledges that make up the epicentre of social production and preordain all areas of life*" including "*formal and informal knowledge, imagination, ethical tendencies, mentalities and 'language games'*" (Virno, 2001) or viewed more generally, as I intend it here as well as the former, 'the community' rather than the special interest.

practitioners of DiEM25, as an example - with the philosophically radical perspectives of the distant view of the activist-thinker *without*. Either alone is likely to be inapplicable, incomplete, and ineffectual.

But! It is also vital - more vital - to remember the view of the ordinary citizen (and to acknowledge the charge that much of this may be theoretical bluster). For Berardi *expectation* and *perception* are sites of revolution as much as parliaments, squares or treatises. Reconceptualising urban space, land, housing, and knowledge, for example as commons, is a more significant lever of change than purely, or primarily, focusing on economic fixes. By simply “*defining what we are expecting from life*” (Berardi, 2009, 00.57s) - an inherently open, public, engaging, joyful process that can be undertaken by activists in all communities, non-combatively, non-ideologically, beyond party politics - rather than focusing on ills and on cures for those ills which inevitably serve to reinforce the perception of their necessity, is surely a first step to a mass conceptualisation of a way out of the present crisis. Bringing democratic accountability to the economic system is a first step toward such a shift in thinking.

*“Libertarian municipalism politicizes the economy and dissolves it into the civic domain.”*

Murray Bookchin, ‘The New Municipal Agenda’ in *From Urbanization to Cities*

## **MUNICIPAL ECONOMICS: Democratise the Economy**

### **Remunicipalisation of Public Services**

The political culture of municipalism is fundamentally about connecting politics with the daily lives of citizens, and one of the most tangible ways to do this is with the concrete, specific examples of public service provision. The municipal level, located between the realm of private ownership on one hand and national state ownership on the other, offers the chance to rationalise, democratise and improve public services that have failed ecologically, socially, and economically, and can allow alternative economic models and methods beyond profit-seeking or large-scale centralisation and bureaucracy to emerge for the benefit of the community.

In Bookchin’s conception of municipalist and confederal politics it is essential that these same structures are carried through to the economy. In the book quoted from above he makes a further distinction beyond the independence of enterprise from nationalised or privatised control, claiming that it should also be independent from worker control: *“syndicalism has had its day”* because *“corporate capitalism is increasingly eager to bring the worker into complicity with his or her own exploitation”* (Bookchin, 1992, p.264). The ‘grow-or-die’ imperative of capitalism forces enterprises into irrational, competitive and ecologically destructive practices. This is a crucial subtlety during a time of resurgent cooperatisation<sup>29</sup>. For him the community, provided it is in charge of its destiny through genuinely democratic institutions, is the ideal and effective owner and governor of land and enterprise.

There are two primary reasons for this. The first is that it makes it possible to move beyond the abstract interaction of individuals from their positions as ‘workers, professionals, managers’, etc., each inevitably with particular interests, views and needs, and allows for the cooperation of individuals as members of a community

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<sup>29</sup> Cooperatives are an undoubtedly positive shift away from existing hierarchical private enterprise structures and toward democratic control by workers themselves, while multi-stakeholder cooperatives broaden this to include customers and community members. Both should be encouraged. I maintain however that it is vital to avoid ‘fetishising’ them as an emancipatory tool, and to remain cautious that they can continue to operate according to the anti-ecological and competitive rules of the economy in which they are embedded.



with a shared general interest. The second, following on from this, is the ability to organise the economy on a rational, ecological basis. In Henri Lefebvre's *A Critique of Everyday Life* he says that towns "*must become a fully conscious work*" in order that "*the everyday and the whole will be works which cannot be dissociated*" (Lefebvre, 2014 [2002] p.500). This is nothing less than a statement that the conditions within which we live out our daily lives must be purposely and deliberately reclaimed from the unplanned, unconscious and anti-ecological driving forces of capital, or equally of state bureaucracy. Lefebvre and Bookchin would agree that the village, town or city must become *holographic*, wherein every individual part contains within itself the entire whole. By this I mean that, if each part is democratic, is ecologically sustainable, is structured and organised to offer a compelling life to its community, etc. then such conditions will pertain to the broader society. This is at the heart of the municipalist response to the issue of scale and spread and to the decommodification of everyday life - reclaiming and democratising the economy therefore is of utmost importance.

Today basic public services such as water, electricity, transport, health and social services and education remain far from secure and sustainable even in the most developed economies. Across states decreasing provision, increasing costs and disappearing accountability has become the norm as services are run evermore aggressively for private profit<sup>30</sup> (Calderbank, 2013). Resistance has been mounting all over the world to the corruption, inefficiency, labour exploitation and ecological damage resulting from their operation within the privatised, competitive market context, and in many places they have been won back 'by and for the people' in a plurality of local struggles - from kindergartens and electricity grids in Germany, to school catering in France, social services in Norway, water in Uzbekistan and education in Nicaragua (Kishimoto & Petitjean, 2017).

As of June 2017 there have been 835 re/municipalisations and 49 re/nationalisations of public services globally, tracing out a trajectory that began rising sharply in 2008 and is continuing to grow. Municipal ownership, wherein services belong to and are operated by a town or district's governing body, is in effect a synthesis and a

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<sup>30</sup> The formerly nationalised energy supplier British Gas recently increased prices by 12.5% whilst parent company Centrica declared 6-month profits of £639 million and a remuneration package for its CEO of £4.15 million (Kollewe & Elgot, 2017).

transcendence of the historical battle between public and private. In the UK mainstream progressive policy discourse is still largely confined to nationalisation (and more minimally cooperatisation) as a response to private mishandling (Labour, 2017), and where municipal ownership is introduced into policy discussions at present it is without the addition of municipal democratic structures or powers and largely subsumed by a more plural locally-led communitarian ownership concept (see Labour, 2017a).

In contrast municipal reacquisitions of the energy supply and distribution infrastructure in Germany total 284 since 2005, and this scale and spread highlights the “*discursive and material openings*” (Becker, 2017) that municipalisation provides in spreading such actions as well as moving beyond the specific issue or service. The involvement of new, non-traditional actors within the sector, such as community or municipally-owned energy companies or cooperative enterprises, in questioning orthodoxies and displaying both competence and creativity in new forms of service provision, demonstrate practically the alternatives that exist not only for a particular local situation but more generally, rippling out altered views of business, efficiency, profit and participation - the revolution in *expectation* and *perception*.

The energy transition in Germany is also then a transition of democracy, scale and economics - the municipalities of Großlobichau and Schöngleina (along with many others) now own and manage their own energy grid instead of multinational investor-owned company E.ON. Its operation, in terms of policy, costs and profits, is embedded in the local council and, at a basic level, democratically accountable to customers and residents and not simply to shareholders. These are by no means fully community embedded municipal enterprises, but they are large steps forward while other governments are at risk of stepping backward, recreating the economics of the past.

This move is not merely about democratic and economic empowerment in the actuality of the service or local economy, but also on a larger scale about the disempowerment of global capital, through transnational corporations, to control the very essences and necessities of life for millions of people. The Catalanian experience of privatised water supply - in which the multiple companies across the region actually belonged to the same single corporate group (Planas, 2017) -

displays not only the absence of control but the lack of resilience inherent in this system. Beyond the issue of cost and profit, what may appear benign to many in the present era of peace could have far greater consequences should political stability crack in the future.

Germany's remunicipalisation experience demonstrates another key aspect of municipalism in the potential to transcend left-right party political ideologies through community and place-based, rather than abstract, issues. In this case "*party affiliation on a left wing-right wing spectrum [did] not strongly predict whether a city council favours remunicipalisation*" (Becker, 2017, p.121), and both conservative and liberal parties have at different times opposed and supported the move toward municipal ownership. This is a key aspect of politics at the municipal level and is something that even Žižek advocates as a way forward out of the un-systemic and negative positions present in anti-capitalist protest<sup>31</sup>, seemingly unaware of its synonymy with what he denigrates as "chaotic" movements for local direct democracy. He says of the debate around healthcare in the US that "*the beauty is to select a topic which touches the fundamentals of our ideology, but at the same time, we cannot be accused of promoting an impossible agenda*" (Žizek, 2012, 5.55s) - that by addressing a tangible need or service, the provision of which can be shown to work elsewhere, "*we [...] stir up public debate but we cannot be accused of being utopians in the bad sense of the term*" (Žizek, 2012, 6.22s) - utopians, or ideological dogmatists or agenda-driven opportunists.

So rather than arguing for a socialist agenda to bring about healthcare reform, Žižek instead sees the potential in arguing for healthcare provision (or affordable, sustainable energy or water or education, etc.) and, by seeing and experiencing it directly, shifting perceptions and presumptions around free markets, competition, public ownership and so on. This is an example of the material influencing the cultural - of putting praxis before ideology - affecting perceptions and mobilising momentum whilst providing tangible services and genuine improvements. The

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<sup>31</sup> "I am, of course, fundamentally anti-capitalist. But let's not have any illusions here. No. What shocks me is that most of the critics of today's capitalism feel even embarrassed, that's my experience, when you confront them with a simple question, "Okay, we heard your story . . . protest horrible, big banks depriving us of billions, hundreds, thousands of billions of common people's money. . . . Okay, but what do you really want? What should replace the system?" And then you get one big confusion." (Žizek, 2012, 0.56s)

municipalisation of public services is thus not merely a practical prefigurative step but an ideational opening for further democratisation.

## Alternative Economic Ecosystems in the Private Sector

While the public sphere offers a democratically achievable ‘in’ to begin altering the economic ‘code’ of the mainstream neoliberal method of public service provision, the private sphere, although ‘freer’, is far more constrained by this economic logic. The ruthlessness of zero-sum capitalist imperatives to grow, compete and outdo make it a powerful conformer, as the case of Mondragon highlighted. Furthermore, the *detritorialisation* of finance and business disconnects economic activity from any lasting, personalised commitment to place and community, the rekindling of which in a global marketplace then becoming a competitive disadvantage. The emergence of new practices and new forms of ownership in the private sphere then requires a nurturing, facilitative network able to insulate and incubate socially and ecologically-minded enterprises from the hard-edged functioning of capitalism. More systemically, community-supported agriculture, community land trusts, community banks and co-ops are examples of tools for the buffering of local capitals - i.e. land (for food production, housing), finance and labour - from the commodification and exploitation of the market as abstract components. They constitute the beginning of an alternative economic ecosystem of ‘non-market capitals’ (Johanisova & Crabtree et al, 2013) able to “*restore the economic base of the community and return economic controls into the hands of the local people*” (Bruyn, 1992). When conflated and cohered within ‘new’<sup>32</sup> economic development concepts such as community development corporations and credit unions they present a new horizon for local economic ‘development’ both practically and conceptually. Vitality, however, if this is to be taken beyond the practice of *communitarianism* and into the political power of systemic, structural reconfiguration (Bookchin, 1999) it must enjoin with municipalist principles of local democratic government and extend laterally for a confederal ‘mutual aid network’. Such structures can address the existential discomfort felt at the reduction of land, water and sustenance to commodity, and the injustice of primitive accumulation, whilst

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<sup>32</sup> Such practices have been around ‘informally’ for decades, particularly in the United States, but they form part of the wave of ‘new economic thinking’ of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

directly confronting and stretching beyond the present economic reductionist paradigm.

By countering the neoliberal narrative that economics is apolitical and value-free, and that the efficiency of a service is only achieved through private, for-profit ownership and competition, the provision of services in a variety of alternative ways - as worker or community cooperatives, community benefit societies, as municipal, inter-municipal, city or regional entities, or as nationalised services - both opposes the degradation of services for private profit and creates new, living demonstrations of alternative ways of organising which can shift cultural conceptions and stem the “*subsumption of the mind under the process of capitalist valorization*” (Berardi, 2007). The very practical, tangible attempt to provide water or energy for a community is thus directly linked with reshaping understanding about more abstract or politically neutralised concepts within the economic system. This is therefore a powerful tool - a holding action, a new system and a shifter of consciousness, simultaneously critiquing neoliberalism and creating something better for the common good. A democratic and rationally managed economy, however, requires a radical departure from the current conception of democratic politics, as I now go on to explore further.

## **Municipal Politics: Radicalise the Democracy**

### **‘Taking Back Control’**

*“[The Conservatives] have a coherent programme to fix our broken politics and drag our democracy into the post-bureaucratic age. It involves a massive, sweeping, radical redistribution of power - from the political elite to the man and woman in the street.”*

David Cameron, 2009

*“Today, we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the people.”*

Donald Trump, 2017

The desire to ‘take back control’ is something that lies within individuals and communities of all political, ideological and class compositions, because the loss of control over daily life that comes with a globalised, homogenised, centralised, financialised - and *externally compulsory* - world is a reality that is faced to varying degrees by the majority of the world’s population. Yet at the same time there is a narrative that the electorate, and particularly the young, are apathetic.

A recent poll in the United States by the Harvard Institute of Politics showed that a majority of 18-29 year olds reject both capitalism and socialism (Harvard, 2016), while a Europe-wide survey coordinated by the European Broadcasting Union revealed that a majority of 18-34 year olds would ‘join a large-scale uprising against the generation in power if it happened in the next days or months’ (Generation What?, 2017). These findings and the trend that they demonstrate suggest two points: the first is that the narrative of political apathy is not fundamentally about a lack of caring about social and political life or an absence of desire for change, but a lack of perception of a genuine, meaningful alternative to the limited horizons of the political mainstream. Largely resulting from anachronistic voting systems (particularly in the UK and US), representative democracy is more compelling for the ‘social minority’ than for the ‘social majorities’, the latter’s supposed ‘underdeveloped politicisation’ (Esteva & Prakash, 1998) being in fact an accurate sensing of the hollowness of the word and institution of democracy. The institution merits the apathy, indeed fosters it. Secondly, that these views are distinctly among the younger generation indicates the weakening and dissipation of the semiotic nature of capitalism and of the state. For a generation socialised in precarity, austerity, ecological breakdown, worsening prospects and existential

meaninglessness, the two terms do not have the same unquestioned connotations that they do among many within the generations before. If this signals a post-ideological phase of politics, and if we are to avoid a descent into nihilism, it could be said that gaining agency and control over daily life is the content that now matters.

This is where the now-contentious word *libertarian* figures, and my claim that the municipal movement can *undercut*, to a significant extent, much left-right division. Libertarianism's conception and association today, particularly in the United States, is almost solely with right-wing politics, evoking a social-Darwinistic free-for-all in which the strong survive unhindered by the state while the weak suffer in its absence. For Bookchin this would have been anathema. For him libertarianism is synonymous with anarchism in the sense of an ethical commitment to freedom from hierarchy, but *essentially* and *only* in concert with a "*communal spirit*" (Bookchin, 1992, p.220).<sup>33</sup> There is no such thing as 'absolute freedom' - we are inextricably intertwined up with necessary obligations to the whole: "*neither the individual nor the collective [...] claim sovereignty over each other, but rather they form a complementary relationship that supports each other*" (p.206). Whether or not the word is employed, the idea, if it can be freed from its social rhetoric, exists at the core of left- and right-motivated opposition to globalisation, the desire for authentic community and belonging, and for control and freedom.<sup>34</sup> Even the neo-Nazi or Western-recruited ISIS fighter is, in many cases, (mis)seeking identity, belonging, solidarity, social and economic safety and meaning within the security of a simplistic narrative able to annul and allay lostness, confusion and nihilism: to fulfill the basic human need "*for cognitive closure and [...] personal significance*" (Kruglanski, 2014).

The oscillation of voters in recent elections in both the UK and the US from right to left ends of the political spectrum and vice versa - UKIP to Corbyn's Labour in the UK, Sanders to Trump in the US - I think speaks to the frustration with the political

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<sup>33</sup> For Bookchin right-wing libertarians have "stolen" the word and reappropriated it for their individualist agenda which is founded on property as the basis for freedom and liberty only for commodification (Bookchin, 1985).

<sup>34</sup> In an eerily prescient paragraph written in 1992, Bookchin foresees that "*if a Leftist movement does not arise in the United States that can give the American commitment to small-town virtues a civic agenda that emphasizes libertarian ethics and a communal spirit, there are good reasons to believe that these virtues will be used by the extreme Right to advance a nativist, Christian fundamentalist, and socially reactionary agenda of its own*" (Bookchin, 1992, p.220)

class occupying the centre ground and the complacency of a minimal programme of countervailing politics, and demonstrates the appeal of the anti-establishment narrative of control and power for the 'ordinary' citizen. The political and socio-economic 'symptoms' presented by both right and left are often aligned - loss of control and political agency, loss of economic security, loss of identity and belonging - but the former, in perpetuating the existing economic orthodoxy, locates blame not systemically at the root of the imperatives of capitalism and the homogenising, socio-culturally denuding nature of neoliberalism, but instead with the 'other', the immigrant, the unemployed.

Political engagement at the local, graspable level presents a chance to cut through this reactionary tendency and ideological adherence. *"Keeping decision making close to home is something both right and left can agree on; municipalization offers genuine workable local solutions for a wide variety of problems, and may restore actual democracy in the face of a new fascism in America"*. So says Burt Cohen (2016), ex-Democratic Senate Majority Leader in the United States Government and longtime activist against the growing plutocratic and oligarchical tendencies within democracy. In the UK the 'localisation' and 'devolution' narratives within the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition government's 'Big Society' agenda, while motivated by shrinking government and responsabilising local councils through times of austerity (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016), were in practice something that - beyond framing or ulterior motives - both sides of the Houses of Parliament could agree on.

Taking the quotes leading this section at face value, the concept of municipalism - if viewed as empowering citizens at the most direct level of government - does not carry with it any obvious ideological or party political baggage, in contrast with the almost universally accepted associations of nationalisation as economically left-wing and privatisation as economically right-wing. It is also, I think, a reminder that much of the population do not think in terms of left-right political allegiances. What much of the left has forgotten in pursuing a discourse which tends toward facts, figures and rationality rather than narrative - the head rather than the gut - is that politics is emotive and many people, consumed as they are by the needs of daily life, will respond to a political message which speaks to them and to their situation. The widespread rejection of the political status quo, without a positive outlet identifying causes systemically and providing a compelling alternative, can easily slip into



negative nationalistic and reactionary narratives that allow the root cause to persist. Maintaining that “*the power of self-determination for people in local communities [...] has been slowly eroded by forces in the capitalist market*” (Bruyn, 1992) while also breaking down the ease of the pathway from frustration to fascism, not solely through liberal moral conceptions of what is right and wrong but with clear, practical actions to hear and understand the concerns of the working class and to enfranchise the excluded is crucial.

*“The next big revolution will be a lot of small revolutions.”*  
Peter Macfadyen

## **Frome Town Council and Beyond - Interview with Peter Macfadyen**

Pissed off in the pub, dissatisfied with the institutional impotence of the town council, and frustrated with the politicking of Liberal Democrat and Conservative councillors and the resultant disengagement of the community, Peter Macfadyen and the core of what was to become the Independents for Frome group (IfF) set out to take things on themselves. They formed a party around a values-based ‘ways of working’ agreement<sup>35</sup> rather than an adherence to a particular ideology, committed to focussing on local issues and the good of the town rather than power and self-aggrandisement, and subsequently achieved a governing majority in their first election and a clean-sweep of council seats four years later.

The story of the ‘peaceful democratic revolution’ in Frome (or *coup* as Peter cheekily calls it [Macfadyen, 2014, p.14]) is well known and detail on its coming into being easily accessible<sup>36</sup> so I don’t intend to take up time and space by repeating what has already been written. My interest in interviewing Peter was in how what happened in Frome fits into the broader picture of municipal politics in the UK and globally. I was interested in Peter’s ‘long view’ of this kind of political action, his experience of it directly and his knowledge of its spread to other communities and councils.

What came out of our informal, unstructured discussion however impacted beyond any specific information. It was the realisation that what is happening in Frome is a core part of the UK’s municipal movement, though it is not self-styled as such (I had been somewhat tongue-in-cheek referring to Frome as ‘the UK’s Barcelona’, deprecating the level of British radicalism), and that it came into being largely unmotivated by the Spanish academics and activists, the political theory of Bookchin or Laclau, or the systemic critiques of capital and neoliberalism. It

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<sup>35</sup> The 5 core values of IfF are independence, integrity, positivity, creativity and respect (Independents for Frome, 2017).

<sup>36</sup> See for example ‘How Flatpack Democracy beat the old parties in the People’s Republic of Frome’ by John Harris in The Guardian, or ‘What a democratic revolution in the Somerset town of Frome could teach our political class’ by Nick Reading in The Independent, or former Mayor himself Peter Macfadyen’s book Flatpack Democracy.

revealed that it is possible to diagnose failures and to reach similar conclusions simply by holding our present democratic structures to account against what they are supposed to represent - a very practical, 'common sense' revolution. A number of Peter's comments lend weight and credibility to what had previously only existed for me as theory so I have elaborated on a selection below:

1. *"You have to join what there is and then try to subvert it"*; engage with the institutions and mechanisms that exist but be aware of the danger of becoming sucked in to old and ineffectual structures and ways of working. It's important to ensure that plans and methods made *outside* of power do not get lost once on the inside.
2. *"Representative democracy doesn't work, political parties are over"*; we are more informed, socially and politically more interconnected and mutually reliant today than ever before, but also with a far greater plurality. Technologically we have great potential to participate in democracy, and a pressing need for a broader range of voices to be heard.
3. *"People's appetite to be engaged is huge"*; but participation has to be genuine - not 'consultative' - and lead to proper feedback and results. IfF held panels and turned the public contribution to those into policy. Over 1000 people engaged with a process concerning local toilets. People care and have great capacity for rational, reasonable engagement over local issues concerning their daily lives, i.e. *politics*, and this should be embraced. The public assemblies at the core of Bookchin's municipalism offer a framework for this engagement.
4. *"Systems undermine the energy and mobilisation of people engaging in legitimate processes"*; dynamic local engagement can be stifled by the closed, unengaged attitude of higher levels of government, and by participation 'lost to the ether' with no response, feedback or results to people's time and efforts, so;
5. *"Create a layer of ways of doing things with councils and communities, to be more autonomous"*; (described further below).

6. *"It has to be positive - we care about things and we want things to happen"; "choices now are all negative and intrinsically we kind of know that's shit, because we care about things and we want things to happen, so being offered negative positions is not good"*. Focus on and articulate what we want to head towards - locally and tangibly, not 'fairness for hardworking families' - rather what we are heading away from.
7. Set an example, draw attention, shift perceptions; as above - by making things happen, improving daily life, demonstrating economic alternatives to the orthodoxy, towns attract attention, in the media and in local government circles. Success breeds imitation, and the spread of new ideas shifts perceptions. People 'higher up' in district councils do see what is happening, know there must be better ways, but are constrained by political norms and party lines: but what if they're all thinking the same thing? With pressure things could cascade...
8. Municipalism can "unfuck democracy<sup>37</sup>"!; if we are to avoid the festering and growth of reactionary, xenophobic, nationalist and isolationist politics then local institutions must be *"reinvented so that [they] can let the people in"* and build *"a new relationship between local councils and citizens"* to show that things can be done differently.

It matters not that Frome is a small town of 27,000 people or that the powers of the parish council are limited in scope to some of the most elementary facets of the institutionalisation of daily life. It has played a part in both critiquing and recreating the nature of democracy for those involved, for the local community, and for those in other towns who have become aware of its success and spread this revolution, making sense of problems and displaying people's ability to work together to find solutions.

What it adds most vitally is an example of municipalism *beyond the city*. Because cities tend to combine the most vibrant and developed expression of social and civil society alongside the most polarised examples of political, social and economic

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<sup>37</sup> This was the informal name of Peter's tour of local communities attempting to reclaim democracy from the *"vacuum that sits beneath the upper layers of our 'democratic' system"* (Macfadyen, 2017), and I think more than merits its strong articulation.

problems, they have become the dominant nodes in this new political imaginary of 'Rebel Cities', 'Fearless Cities', 'Cities in Transition' and so on. Frome and its satellite small town revolutions, however modest, add an important extra level of granularity and a different set of perspectives and priorities to the movement. As Murray Bookchin wrote in *From Urbanization to Cities*, city life "*depends to a remarkable degree on the viability and the economy of agrarian communities and labor*" (Bookchin, 1992, p.87), and while, as a result of globalisation, these agrarian communities are often no longer surrounding a city but spread out on different continents, the active engagement of all of them is vital to ensuring that needs are met beyond those of *capitals* and *capital*. Frome is not an agrarian community but it remains indissoluble from what happens in the cities. Rediscovering that issues as large as food miles, sustainable agriculture, material and economic sustenance for rural livelihoods, not to mention the necessity of awakening the suburban from the grey, atomised, heartless malaise at its core, can begin to be addressed by the engagement of ordinary people in small towns - they are as valid and vital a unit of politics as the city.<sup>38</sup>

This sounds naïvely hopeful, after all the Transition Town movement has been addressing specifically these issues for over a decade and yet these destructive systems are stronger than ever. What is Frome or Totnes in the face of TTIP? But where this differs from the Transition Town movement, as well as from individual issue campaigns, protests, NGO work, etc., is in its explicitly political nature and its direct engagement with structures of government. It is through the engagement with politics and the tackling of scale, centralisation, homogenisation, hierarchy and financial dominance that the root of many of these issues is revealed, and through the filling of the evacuated sites of government with a citizenry engaged in politics that the absent power of neoliberal economics is gradually ushered out. "*Every democratic revolution has begun with a commitment to pervasive local participation*" (Barber, 1984, p.267). Frome shows that this does not everywhere have to be a combative, ideological fight framed by anti-capitalist and anti-state

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<sup>38</sup> Indeed, in Bookchin's conception and in Barcelona en Comú's practice, the city's politics must be devolved to match its authentic boroughs, neighbourhoods and humanly-comprehensible units. Thus London ceases to be a monolithic city of faceless millions but a vibrant collection of communities and its political components become comparable to and equal with those of the towns and villages outside.

rhetoric, but can instead come into being simply because people choose to become involved again in their communities.

From my discussion with Peter and my understanding of the theory feeding into the municipal movement, the next step in building these ‘small revolutions’ into something more widespread appears twofold. The first aspect is the creation of a conceptual and compelling narrative of what these small town political movements are doing - bringing genuine democratic practices to the most direct, quotidian layer of governance - in order to unite the seemingly sporadic uprisings into a systemic and coherent challenge to the status quo. In demonstrating that this is the beginning of a politics that fulfills the Brexit-UKIP rhetoric of ‘taking back control’ - *from* centralised government, *from* the powers of capital, *for* the wellbeing of the community, *without* the xenophobia, hostility and division - they can show that it is here, in a plural, humanly-scaled community that lives and works together, that the division sown by national politics and media can be most effectively challenged. Importantly it is not merely about achieving the provision of basic needs and services (though that itself is a considerable task in the present political climate), but creating an engaged community that can go beyond the confines of the rules set by the present political, social and economic structures and find new ways of living - and to flourish. As Benjamin R. Barber states, “*the taste for participation is whetted by participation: democracy breeds democracy*” (Barber, 1984). If experience is united with a conceivable trajectory, a transformative deeper or ‘strong’ democracy can become self-perpetuating.

The second part of this *rippling out* is the creation of a tangible politico-economic network or *proto-confederation* able to foster a degree of economic autonomy from, and to leverage the actions of, the next tiers of government. Peter’s experience is of a glass ceiling below the district council limiting the power of Frome’s town council and its citizens to the confines of Parish politics, rendering such fundamentals as planning, infrastructure and environmental policy out of reach. Already the Independents for Frome-led town council has been creating direct relationships with agencies and funders such as the NHS and the Lottery in order to work around this - this is Peter’s “layer of ways of doing things”. This idea could be extended toward systematically gaining control over structural capitals and community assets in the region - the land, labour, knowledge and capital - through mechanisms such as the

community development trust and community development credit union, in order to democratically involve residents in shaping local policy while utilising the agency and finance that may be laying dormant in the area<sup>39</sup>. Activity could also be extended beyond Frome to other town councils within the same district, fostering cooperation on public and private sector economic resilience or exploring ways to retain and recirculate money in the area through fulfilling locally the needs of ‘anchor institutions’<sup>40</sup> such as schools and hospitals, or installing renewable energy on municipal premises through a community benefit society, among many other highly tangible and pragmatic tools of new economic thinking. The potential for a public-private economic and political ecosystem to cultivate political agency more broadly would merit research and a dissertation of its own. Such actions in generating local autonomy and economic (and therefore social) resilience could work towards demonstrating the viability of these practices and potentially their adoption and encouragement by the previously recalcitrant bodies, or in the face of resistance the growth of an economic ‘dual power’ to contest the legitimacy of a stymying layer of government, in either case raising the potential of facilitating a broader, deeper shift in policy and an extension of the democratic principles. As de Tocqueville said in 1831, “*a nation may establish a system of free government, but without the spirit of municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty*” (de Tocqueville, 1831).

There is history to back up the quote from Peter which opened this section. Whether it is the revolutionary sections of Paris in 1790, the anarchist collectives of Catalonia in 1939, or the Zapatista caracoles and Kurdish communes of today, revolutionary local self-governance - and even the national political reforms and enfranchisements of the past two centuries - all constituted change or transformation that began small, local, and seemingly up against impossible odds. Says Pablo Carmona of Ahora Madrid, the citizen platform which won the city in 2015, “*all great revolutions take place at the local level*” (Zemos98, 2015, 4m10s), and as Bernie Sanders reiterates, “*real change never takes place from the top down*” (Sanders, 2016). It is essential then that what is *just* is not lost for what is *expedient*, and that what constitutes the possible *today* does not limit the conception of what may be possible *tomorrow*.

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<sup>39</sup> See for example Wessex Community Assets or the Bridport Area Development Trust.

<sup>40</sup> Inspired by the Evergreen Co-ops in Detroit (Evergreen Cooperatives, 2017).

*“Whether the twenty-first century will be the most radical of times or the most reactionary - or will simply lapse into a gray era of dismal mediocrity - will depend overwhelmingly upon the kind of social movement and program that social radicals create out of the theoretical, organizational, and political wealth that has accumulated during the past two centuries of the revolutionary era.”*

Murray Bookchin, *The Next Revolution*

## **CONCLUSION**

We are at a new moment in political theory and political reality, one wherein the two are seemingly on a journey to alignment. Many of the social and political dualities that have seemed irreconcilable are being transcended. The old alternatives of big state socialism and small state market capitalism; of nationalisation and privatisation; of capitalism and communism; and of the individual and the society, are no longer being seen as the only political, economic and social realities.

A new scale and a new political and economic conception is slowly beginning to emerge, in thought and in practice: of communities directed by their citizens instead of by the market or a state bureaucracy; of public services owned by the citizens who use them instead of by the centralised state or by private companies for the profit of a few; of a rational economic system *contained by* the political, cultural and ecological, not dictating to and destroying it; and of public goods and social commons owned by the community and utilised for the common good, not for exclusion and extraction.

In a febrile political environment in which many are suffering and we are witnessing once again elements of the powerful blaming the powerless and the *other* for that suffering; where reactionary politics and neofascism appear locked in a disconcertingly even battle with progressive thought; and where the four-decade long consensus on the political centre-ground of neoliberal economics with a veneer of progressive social policy is beginning to crack, contemporary society appears to be reaching a point of disillusion and dissolution. Yet election results in the two largest countries perpetuating this neoliberal politico-economic union, and beyond, suggest that a social majority exists against both right and centre. It is therefore a



distinctly political and organisational task to translate this into a political majority - but also a radical one, and at this tipping point, a socio-cultural one too.

The existing channels and structures of democracy in the United Kingdom and the United States, the media establishment that surround them, and the economic barriers to participation are such that, not the overthrow of capitalism, not the secession of the municipality from the State, but simply the genuine participation and involvement of the public in decisions that concern them is a political quest that must be defended and fought for. The former two points, while existing at the core of Murray Bookchin's municipal programme and constituting significant emancipatory aims from my political perspective, have receded somewhat during this writing period behind the more everyday task of democratisation - I have realised that my focal point has become something different from what I thought it would be. I have not become dedicated to abstract political theory, nor enthralled by the militancy of radical political movements, nor developed a desire for wholesale disengagement from the oppressive structures of governance and the creation of something entirely new. What has percolated to the top during this process is, simply, the commitment to hold the present structures to account on their use of the word *democracy*, and to reveal 'democratic centralism' for the oxymoron that it is. I have discovered that what I had conceived of as *radical democracy*<sup>41</sup> - the direct engagement of citizens with their problems, solutions and desires, in common - is in reality *just democracy*. Thus my conclusion cannot claim to be radical. I have come to realise that the global municipal movements are doing simply this - holding the democratic claim of their states to account, taking them at their word and challenging them to resist. What they are doing *is* radical, but only by relation to how far the present has migrated from its origins: how far democracy under late capitalism is from its conception in Ancient Greece, even how far it is from what it is *purported to be* today.

There is the shadow of Gandhi's struggle for *Hind Swaraj*<sup>42</sup> to this: *using* the rhetorical morality of hegemonic 'democracy' to achieve self-governance, to then "*go beyond the Western morality of the modern nation-state*" (Esteva & Prakash,

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<sup>41</sup> In this case a signifier from Lummis (1996) and Esteva (1998), distinct from that employed by Laclau and Mouffe.

<sup>42</sup> Indian Home Rule.

1998). The social movements are the substance to what has for so long been rhetoric. Indeed, “*democracy is and always has been the most radical proposal, and constitutes a critique of every sort of centralized power*” (Lummis, 1996). Democratisation at the municipal scale is the root from which not merely solutions, but transformations of our many problems will grow.

But there was a second aspect to my question which I cannot claim to have answered - can and will this movement mark a break not only with neoliberal ‘democracy’, but with the economic structures and socio-cultural pervasion of capitalism? I can only contend, and hope that I have evidenced to some degree, that the process of engaging with and reclaiming politics through these newly-opened and humanly-scaled structures; the experience of working collaboratively as a community to achieve positive, tangible change; the viability of alternative economic practices in the public and private sector and the ushering in of a vision of life beyond narrow economic reductionism and competition; amongst all the other small and large victories which challenge the dominance of neoliberalism, will make visible at least the possibility of a liberated post-capitalist world, one beyond the prism of pre-formed ideology and the exigencies of the centralised state. Whether the transnational and non-sectarian language and practice of municipalism, in creating a movement that reaches beyond lines of class and identity, can bring to bear a genuine people’s movement with a common, general interest against the private motives of the capitalist organising principle, and fundamentally whether this will ultimately “*abolish the conditions of life determined by wage-labour*” (Dauvé, 2017) or bring into being an ecologically harmonious society, I cannot make any claims. At the very least, community, solidarity and mutual aid can be rescued and preserved to form the nuclei of a new society. But beyond this necessary and inevitable doubt, through this process I have discovered for myself, and maybe for a handful of others, some methods that appear, in the present moment, most able to bring into being the kind of society that I would wish to inhabit, and that will improve daily life as they go. As an outcome of an academic journey, as the result of a year of questioning and discarding and relearning, of becoming adrift and rediscovering a new set of coordinates by which to navigate the material and the metaphysical, this is a discovery that I can be content with. I feel I can finally do justice to the quote that greeted me on my first entrance to Schumacher College:

*“Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way.*

*Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.  
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it!”*

W. H . Murray & Johann Wolfgang von Goethe<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> This quote is often attributed in its entirety to Goethe, however only the final two lines are his. The preceding lines are featured in *The Scottish Himalaya Expedition*, 1951. (Lee, 1998)

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## APPENDIX

### Cities and towns represented at Fearless Cities International Municipalist Summit:

A Coruña, Spain	Chicago, USA	London, United Kingdom	Seattle, USA
A Estrada, Spain	Clearwater, USA	Los Angeles, USA	Seville, Spain
Aalborg, Denmark	Copenhagen, Denmark	Lyon, France	Siena, Italy
Adeje, Spain	Córdoba, Argentina	Madrid, Spain	Sitges, Spain
Albacete, Spain	Cracow, Poland	Mallorca, Spain	Skopje, Macedonia
Albano Laziale, Italy	Delhi, India	Malmö, Sweden	[FYROM]
Albuquerque, USA	Derik, Syria	Manchester, UK	Stockholm, Sweden
Amed, North Kurdistan	Detroit, USA	Mantes la Jolie, France	Stockton, CA, USA
Amsterdam, Netherlands	Diyarbakir, Turkey	Marseille, France	Strängnäs, Sweden
Antwerp, Belgium	Edinburgh, UK	Mataró, Spain	Sydney, Australia
Arica, Chile	El Vendrell, Spain	Milanówek, Poland	Taranto, Italy
Arico, Spain	Errenteria, Spain	Minneapolis, USA	Terrassa, Spain
Asaba/Delta state, Nigeria	Ferrol, Spain	Molinilla- Álava, Spain	Tokyo, Japan
Aspen, USA	Firgas. Las Palmas, Spain	Montréal, Canada	Toronto, Canada
Asunción, Paraguay	Fortaleza, Brasil	Montreuil, France	Torrelles de Llobregat, Spain
Athens, Greece	Frankfurt, Germany	Naples, Italy	Totnes, United Kingdom
Attica, Greece	Gáldar, Spain	New Orleans, USA	Trieste, Italy
Autevielle-St Martin-Bideren, France	Galway, Ireland	New York City, USA	Udine, Italy
Avilés, Spain	Gata, País Valencià. Spain	New York, USA	Uppsala, Sweden
Badalona, Spain	Ghent, Belgium	Norrköping, Sweden	Valencia, Spain
Barcelona, Spain	Gothenburg, Sweden	Osorno, Chile	Valladolid, Spain
Beirut, Lebanon	Gran Canaria, Spain	Ourense, Spain	Vallirana, Spain
Belem, Brazil	Grenoble, France	Padova, Italy	Valparaíso, Chile
Belgrade, Serbia	Helsingborg, Sweden	Palma, Spain	Vancouver, Canada
Belo Horizonte, Brazil	Hervás, Spain	Pamplona, Spain	Venice, Italy
Berkeley, California, USA	Hong Kong, China	Paris, France	Vila-seca, Spain
Berlin, Germany	Iasi, Romania	Pasto, Colombia	Vilafranca del Penedès, Spain
Birmingham, USA	Igualada, Spain	Philadelphia, USA	Villaggio resta, Italy
Bogotá, Colombia	Ilhabela, Brasil	Pisa, Italy	Warsaw, Poland
Bologna, Italy	Indianapolis, USA	Portland, USA	Washington, DC, USA
Brasilia, Brazil	Jönköping, Sweden	Prague, Czech Republic	Wellington, New Zealand
Bridgeport, USA	Juba, South Sudan	Qamishlo, Syria	Zagreb, Croatia
Brisbane, Australia	Kilkis, Greece	Riga, Latvia	Zaragoza, Spain
Brussels, Belgium	Krakow, Poland	Rio de Janeiro, Brasil	
Buckfastleigh, UK	L'Ametlla del Vallès, Spain	Rome, Italy	
Budapest, Hungary	l'Hospitalet, Barcelona, Spain	Rosario, Argentina	
Burlington, Vermont, USA	La Orotava, Spain	Saint Paul, USA	
California, USA	Lausanne, Switzerland	Saint-Étienne, France	
Canterbury, UK	Leeds, United Kingdom	San Cristobal de La Laguna, Spain	
Cape Town, South Africa	León, Spain	San Francisco, USA	
Castellisbal, Spain	Leuven, Belgium	San Juan, Puerto Rico	
Castelldefels, Spain	Lille, France	Sant Cugat del Vallès, Spain	
Celrà, Spain	Lima, Perú	Sant Feliu de Codines, Spain	
Cerdanyola del Vallés, Spain	Limoges, France	Sant Joan Despi, Spain	
Chalandri, Greece	Lisboa, Portugal	Santiago de Compostela, Spain	
	Livorno, Italy	São Paulo, Brasil	
	Lleida, Spain		